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WESTERN

15¢ FICTION MONTHLY

"TEXANS DIE HARD" by DANE COOLIDGE

APRIL

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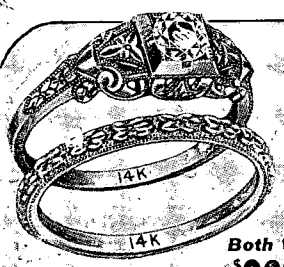

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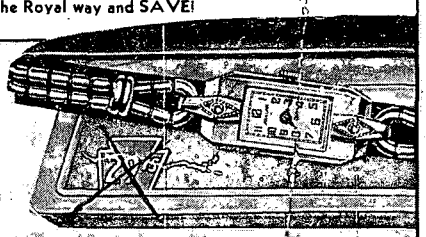

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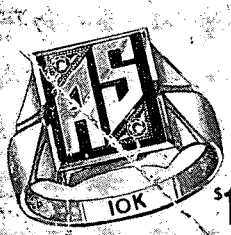

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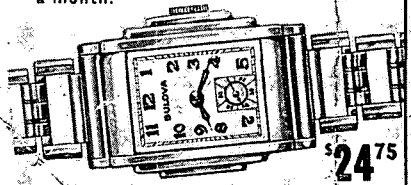

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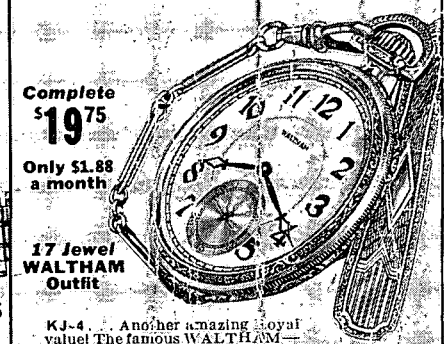

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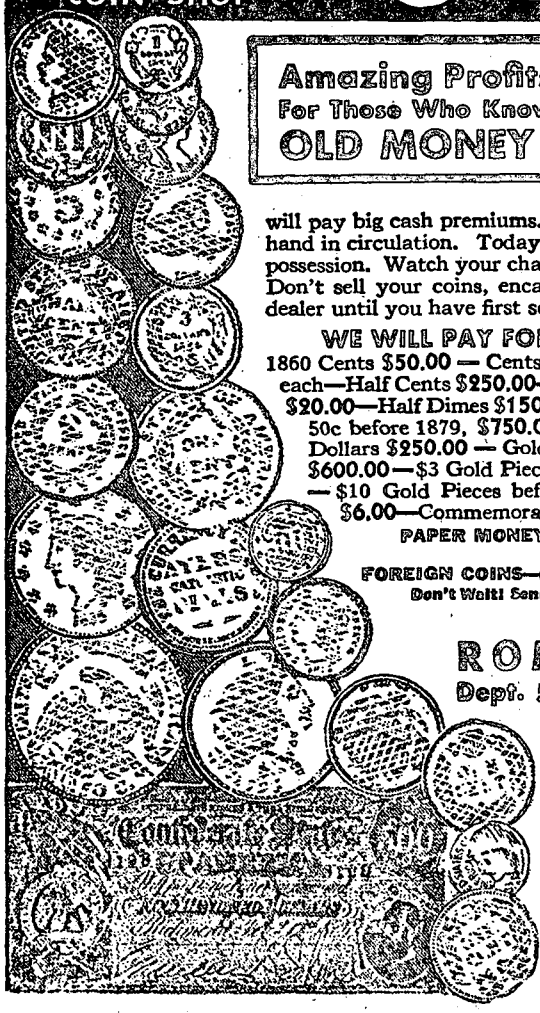

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WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

Yearly Subscription, $1.75 — APRIL, 1936, ISSUE

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* * * * * *

Cover by J. W. Scott
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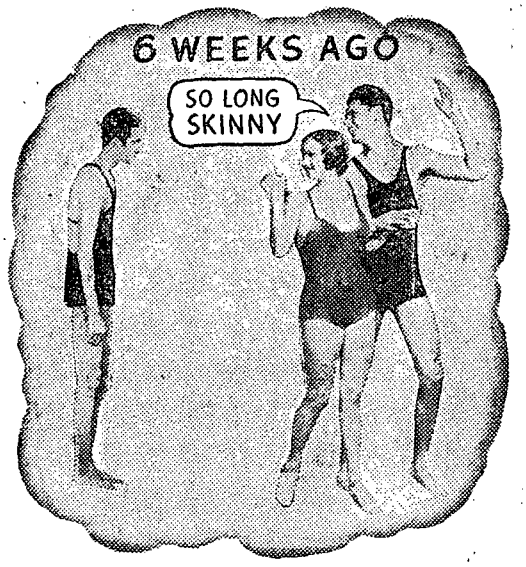

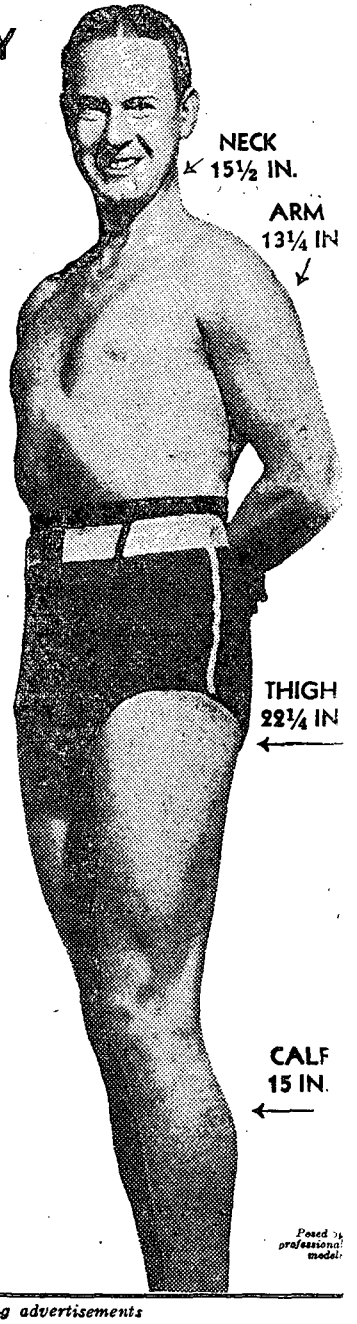

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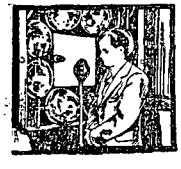

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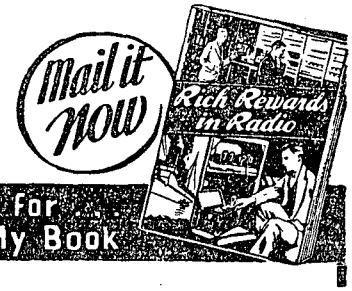

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TEXANS DIE HARD

By DANE COOLIDGE

CHAPTER I

The Troop of Death

THERE was another red flag across the river in Mexico; and from the poles where two "traitors" had hung for months two more "traitors" were being hung. Another Troop of Death had entered Double Adobes with the skull and cross bones on their flag and the leaders of the previous revolution were paying for the change with their lives. That was the price which the vanquished had to pay, and the Mexicans had learned to expect it, but to the Americans at Smugglers' Crossing it brought curses and cold chills.

"Well, damn their black hearts!" complained Buffington Hall. "I cain't no ways git used to this, boys. It may be all right, but it's too rank for me. I'm going to bring those cows of mine *out!*"

"Yes, but who's goin' to he'p him?" inquired one cowboy of another, "for forty a month and found?"

Nobody answered—their spirits were low—but Hall's blood was beginning to boil.

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"This ain't no revolution!" he grumbled. "It's nothing but cold-blooded murder. Ketching each other and stringing 'em up. I'm going to move *out*, I say! First I lose my mine—and a damned good mine, too—and Fausto Parral and his gang of bandits loot the store. Then Madero's men come—and then Orozco's—and now these! But hanging 'em—that's what gits me!"

He turned to Jack Moore, his wagon-boss, who sniffed and spit down the wind.

"Have to wait a while, Boss," he advised. "These are soldiers—with real uniforms and guns!"

"All the same," continued Buff, "I'm going to bring them cattle out. Here I've waited two years for conditions to git better, and they're gitting worse and worse. Twenty—thousand—head—and not a calf branded. Two-year-old mavericks all over the range and I cain't even prove they're *mine*. No brands—no ear-marks—nothing!"

He looked about for sympathy, but no one was indignant except him. He had lost his mine—sure. He had lost cattle, too. But whoever rode in and tried to bring out those cows was liable to decorate a pole. These yellow-bellied "patriots" had lots of poles—all that was left of a telegraph line—and nothing would please them more than to string up a passel of Texans.

"Ump-umm," shrugged Jack Moore. "You're gitting excited, Boss. This hanging don't set well with me."

"No, nor me," spoke up Bandy Storms. "You can have my job back, any time."

"I'll lead you, myse'f!" offered the Boss. "And I'll stay till the last man gits out. Are we going to let a gang of low-browed Fed Flaggers say we cain't set foot in Mexico?"

"Well, I am," stated Bandy, morosely. "I hain't lost nothing over there."

"But suppose," suggested Buff Hall,

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eagerly, "I'd pay you five dollars a day? What then?"

"That's different," acknowledged Storms, with a knowing glance at the rest. "And you wouldn't lose nothing, at that. Them cows are worth money on this side—but what about Fausto Parral?"

THE wind-roughened face of Buffington Hall turned brick red at the mention of that name and he went into a fit of cursing.

"Never mind," he muttered to himself; and fixed Bandy with a wintry eye.

"All right, Mr. Storms; you're fired," he said. And wrote him out his time, right there.

"Anybody else?" he inquired; and a heavy silence fell on the crowd.

"I don't want no man working for me," he went on, "that's afraid of Fausto Parral. He's nothing but a low-down, Mexican cow-thief pretending to be a scholar and a gentleman—sending poems to my daughter, the son-of-a goat, while he runs off my cattle by the thousand. Now you git out of here, Bandy, and don't you come back. You're a dod-rammed coward and no good, anyway. Go on, now! Roll your bed!"

"Ehr!" snarled the cowboy, backing off. "So I'm a coward, am I? Then what about these yaps that are going to *stay?* Did any of them offer to cross? How about the Texas Rangers, that cain't find hide nor hair of Parral? And him on this side half the time, making eyes at Miss Anitra, the rascal!"

"*I* ain't afraid to cross," spoke up the wagon-boss, "and shoot hell out of Fausto and his gang. The trouble is, we've got no business over there, and if the Mexicans ketch us, they'll hang us!"

"You Bandy!" warned Hall, "I told you to go. I got troubles enough without having you around, trying to break down the spirit of my men. They're good boys, every one of 'em, and game to go to hell for me—"

"Yeah!" jeered the bow-legged Bandy, "I've heerd that line of talk before. Well, let 'em stay, sez I, and git shot in the belly for forty a month and found. Or hanged, maybe, on them telegraph poles. I'm glad to git my time, I'll say—and here comes some more brave men, fighting Mexicans for forty dollars per!"

He peeled his teeth as eight Texas Rangers came pelting down the river, and the sergeant rolled his eyes at him grimly.

"What are *you* running off at the head about?" he asked, and ignored him to look across the river. Two more men, strung up to telegraph-poles—and now a third one was being led out.

"I sez," yapped back Bandy, "you're *afraid to* go across there!"

"Who's *that* they're going to execute?" demanded Sergeant Irons, reaching for his glasses; and as he brought them to a focus he slammed them into the case and charged across the Rio Grande.

"It's Buster McCann!" he shouted back and his seven men plunged in after him.

"Come on, boys!" bellowed Buff Hall, making a run for his horse; and they knocked half the water out of the Ford trying to catch up with Winchester Irons.

"Lave me at 'em!" shrilled Bandy Storms, spurring in last of all; and once more Old Mexico was invaded.

CHAPTER II

Our Sister Republics

BUSTER McCANN was rolling a cigarette as they stood him up against the wall, and his hands did not tremble—they noticed that. The five little soldiers who made up the firing-squad gazed admiringly as not a flake fell, but the lieutenant stood grimly erect. He was whipping out his sword to give the signal to fire when Buster saw Irons hit the river, and all the other Rangers following.

"A light?" suggested a soldier, politely; and Buster wrinkled his eyes to a smile.

"To show me the way down to hell—eh, my seregant?" And the grizzled soldier returned his salute.

It was quite a ceremony, this execution of a prisoner, and the Gringo knew his part to perfection. He ignored the officer, whose descending blade would signal his death, and addressed the fir-

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ing-squad, man to man. Even jestingly.

"If I must die, boys," he said, "I leave my women to you. Are you able? Can you do your duty?"

"Yes, *cabron!*" they laughed back, heaving up their heavy guns which they could hardly bring to a point.

"But no!" he replied, suddenly shaking his head. "You are only boys yet—I believe I will live."

He jerked a thumb towards the river, where the Rangers were half-way across, and went off into cackling laughter.

"They are my friends," he announced. "The famous Texas Rangers, who will save me or avenge my death. So let me live, *amigos*—it will be better for you—and I will borrow the price of a drink."

The lieutenant looked again and sheathed his sword abruptly. After all, it was the men who ruled in this Troop of Death, and this American spoke the language of the country. He spoke the vile *pelado* of the common people who had risen up and overthrown Huerta.

"*Kai, amigos!*" hailed McCann, stepping forth from the crowd and waving a welcoming hand. "Just in time to buy the drinks! These boys have spared my life—is it not right to give them a *copita?* But I am broke—I have nothing—alas!"

He patted his rifled pockets with such a doleful look that even the lieutenant smiled—and all the time his friends were coming nearer, whipping and spurring to save his life.

"*Seguro!*" shouted back Irons. "Your friends are mine, Buster. A *copita?* To be sure! This is just a social call. We thought for a moment they had got you confused with those they considered traitors!"

He came splashing up the bank, ignoring the scowling Captain who stood before the Double Adobes, and, dropping off his horse, he laid hold of McCann and gave him a Mexican hug.

"Ah, rascal!" he laughed. "After some woman, I'll swear! But beware—these brave soldiers will be jealous!"

He showed the deep dimples in his ruddy cheeks as he flung his hand towards the crowd, and by just so much he included the frowning Captain, whom he now saluted with the greatest respect. His men lined up behind him, all the cowboys came dashing across; and by the time Bandy Storms rode out on the bank the Mexicans had decided to be friends. And why not, when the Americans were all laughing and embracing Buster and there was talk of nothing but the drinks? Buffington Hall sent two men back to bring across the demijohns and drink to a lasting peace with Captain Torres.

HE was a big, rugged man of the bandit type and with few of the graces of the soldier, but he had been surprised out of his grouch by this sudden visitation, which even now he could scarcely understand. All he knew was he had tried this Gringo they called Buster—but who had gone by the name of No Clothes—and had sentenced him to death. And then, before the fusillade rang out, all these Texas Rangers had crossed.

They were big, laughing men, weighed down with rifles and pistols but, like their commander, very polite. And this ragged American he had been about to execute seemed to be their particular friend. A huge man, clad principally in a pair of bib overalls; but the horse he rode was stolen—or so an informer had said. But No Clothes was a good man, too, for he showed no hard feeling towards those who had threatened his life. First of all he embraced the firing-squad and begged them to drink hearty when the demijohns of whiskey came across.

It was too late for Captain Torres to stand on his rights and forbid them to set foot in Mexico. They were *there,* an armed horde, who could shoot him to doll-rags—and Buffington Hall was proposing a toast.

"To our Sister Republics!" he shouted; and after the drinks they embraced.

CHAPTER III

"No Clothes"

WHO can love their friends like the Mexicans—and drink and drink through the night? When the Rangers rode back, with Buff Hall and his cowboys, they were sworn to eternal amity. And to

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show he had no fear, Buster McCann had remained behind, still begging them to drink from his bottle.

"Win," said Buffington Hall, as they set foot in Texas, "you're one man in ten thousand with these Mexicans. But who is this Buster McCann?"

"Oh, a friend of mine," evaded Irons. "Can't stand to see 'em shoot an American."

"Say! Come up to the house!" proposed Buffington eagerly. "I don't care if it *is* late—I want to make you a proposition. No—Anitra will be asleep."

"All right," agreed Win. "Camp inside the 'dobe, boys." And he rode on to the white house on the hill.

It had been a smugglers' fort and a Spanish hacienda and headquarters for the Reina del Oro Mining Company. Now it offered a safe retreat for Buffington Hall while the Revolution was going on in Old Mexico.

"Win," began Hall, after they had entered the guarded gate and he had set out a bottle in his office. "How much do you get with the Rangers?" How'd you like to resign and take over a special job—getting my cattle out of Mexico?"

"Nope," answered Irons. "Captain Ross wouldn't like it. He kinder depends on me to scout this lower country until we clean up on Fausto Parral."

"You'll never do it!" shrugged Buff. "And you can set your own price, Win. I want them cattle *out.*"

"Well, go ahead and take 'em out. Fix it up with this new captain. But don't count on me—I'm a Ranger."

"But I can't do it, Win. Nor Jack Moore nor none of them. I need a man like you, that can ride right in among them and come out the best of friends."

"Not me," disclaimed Irons. "That was Buster McCann's work. I just filled his hand or they'd 've shot him."

"Well, who *is* he?" insisted Hall. "Where'd you meet him before?"

"Oh, the Rangers picked him up over a horse he was riding. He's a great lover of horse-flesh—Buster."

"Aha!" nodded Buff Hall, smiling grimly. "Then tell me this, Irons—did you charge across that river to save a man you knew was a hawse-thief?"

"He was Buster McCann—that's all I knew. An American citizen, about to be executed. Well, good night, Mr. Hall; I'll be going."

He was up and out the door before Hall could catch his breath or get the rest of his talk off his chest. A man of few words, and quick as lightning to act. That was Winchester, every time. The one man in Texas who could get those cows across—and working for a Ranger's pay! But before he left he had given Buff an idea and the next day he went to see Captain Torres. Here was a man with the salary of a *captain*—getting his pay in *pesos*, at that—and for the privilege of moving his cattle across the Line, Hall could afford to give him a cut. A big cut, if he held out for it; but Torres would not take a cent. All he wanted was the duty—two *pesos* a head—to be paid to Pancho Villa, his general.

"But hombre," reasoned the Texan, "that is rather a high duty. Is there not some other way? Perhaps you will be gone on the day I cross my cattle?"

"YES, yes—I will be gone," agreed Torres. "I must march down the river, to clear this land of traiters; but the duty must be paid. Understand? As for me, I want nothing. I will accept nothing. Don Pancho is honest! You understand? He is not like the traitors who served under Huerta—keeping all for themselves, giving nothing to the Government. He is trying to help the people, and you must pay. If I accepted one peso and he found out I had done it he would order me against the wall. All we ask is that you pay—and if you do not, understand, we will seize all the rest of your cattle."

"Yes, yes!" assented Hall. "Of course I will pay. If that is the law I will pay for every cow—but what about this bandit, Fausto Parral?"

"I am marching down the river to his stronghold, Señor Hall; but to call him a bandit is too much. Pancho Villa was called a bandit when he defended the people's rights—when he—"

"But this man is stealing my cows!" protested Buff. "He runs them across the river by the hundred. If I pay the duty I demand that I be protected—"

"Make no demands on me!" broke in the captain, rising up. "And remem-

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ber, you are in Mexico. The people rule here, and one Gringo more or less—"

He stopped with a gesture which Buffington Hall understood and he saw he had gone too far.

"Very well, *mi Capitan,* he responded humbly, and made haste to the Texas side. But as he sat by Roofless Adobe—which had once had a roof before the Mexicans burned it down—he was aware of a lone rider, splashing across the ford, riding drunkenly, but on a very good horse. A magnificent black, with a silver-mounted saddle—but so ragged the Mexicans called him No Clothes. It was Buster McCann—and the horse was stolen, of course.

But he was a man who knew Mexicans and could speak their vile *pelado,* every other word of which was an oath. All he could talk about was women and drinking, with vulgar jests that made the Red Flaggers roar. Yet the very man, after all, to carry on negotiations with Torres, for he had no fear of death. It had been brought home to Hall that Captain Torres might swing him up to a pole.

What a land in which to have twenty thousand white-faced cattle! What a country for a white man to venture into! Buffington Hall was a nervy man, but he had seen such sights too long. The fighting edge of his courage was gone.

"*Buenos dias, amigo,*" he hailed; and Buster looked up and grinned.

"Howdy do—howdy do!" he answered; and stepped down off his horse.

"Say," he said, "where's that Texas Ranger that claimed to be my friend? I never saw him but once before in my life!"

"He's gone down the river," replied Hall. "But sit down, they'll soon be back. How'd you come to git caught by them Red Flaggers?"

"Oh, I met 'em on the trail and they seen my horse, so one of 'em claimed it was his. The devil's son, I'll send him to hell for that. But that's Mexicans! They're treacherous. If you're riding a good mount they'll try to git you killed for it. He was a good feller—that Texas Ranger."

"YES," agreed Buffington. "I've been trying to hire him to do a little special work for me. Round up them Hawg Eye cattle and put 'em across the Rio Grande. But ump-umm, he'd rather be a Ranger. Rather work for forty a month than take two hundred from me."

"Yes, sir!" agreed McCann. "He must be mighty peculiar. It ain't everybody, now, that would spur into that river, jest to save some absolute stranger; pretending the way he did we was old compadres—coming over to have a drink! Them are bad hombres, Mister—regular Pancho Villa fighting men—and sure as hell I was skeered. Jest stalling 'em off by rolling a cigarette until I could see a chance to make a break, when there *he* comes, charging across the river. I've got to shake hands with that man."

"Yes, yes; make yourself at home," responded Hall. "There's our chuck-wagon down there; and when you've had your sleep I reckon I can give you a job."

"All right," agreed Buster, "if it's on this side of the Line. It ain't no ways salubrious for a white man, over there—and going to be worse, I reckon."

"Worse!" echoed Buffington. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, they're gitting kind of ringy, and especially toward Americans. I was afraid to come across, last night."

"Afraid! I was afraid to *stay!* They ain't one man in ten thousand that could've got us back alive—and him working for a Ranger's pay!"

"That's right, that's right. But I seen that bad Mexican, the one that wanted my horse, keeping sober so he could shoot me in the back; so I had to stick around until we could git him good and drunk. That Captain done 'fiscated my guns."

He lit a cigarette and sighed as he settled against the warm wall, and Buffington Hall let him sleep.

"There's a man I can use," he muttered. "When he gits back his nerve, of course."

CHAPTER IV

A Break for Buff Hall

BUSTER McCANN was not the only man who had lost his nerve. Never in the history of the country had there been so many Texans afraid of Mexicans. There was something

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about those bodies, swinging slowly in the wind, that broke the courage of the bravest; but when Buster woke up and had a feed and a couple of drinks he consented to go across.

"Oh, that's all right," he laughed. "I don't care *what* happens to me." And he came back chuckling to himself.

"Torres says you didn't understand," he reported. "General Villa needs the money, so go ahead and gather your cattle. Only be sure to pay the duty, that's all."

"What?" shouted Hall. "He said that? Captain Torres? But listen, McCann—did he mean it?"

"W'y, sure!" replied Buster. "These Villa men are honest. Only be damned sure you pay that duty. Two pesos a head for every cow you cross, and don't try to bribe the customs guards.

"No?" queried Buff Hall, doubtfully. "I thought they all had a hand out."

"Not these men—not Villa's! It's hanging if they take a crooked dollar."

"I'll remember that!" promised Hall; and soon the bell was ringing in the tower above the gate, the quicker to recall his men.

They crossed the next morning, chuckwagon and all, and for five dollars a day Buster McCann went with them—and all the stray cowboys in the country. Only Bandy Storms remained, the sinister grin on his tough mug; still making slighting remarks about men who would work in Mexico for a miserable five dollars a day. The truth was he had been fired and Hall would not take him back. He needed men, but not that bad. Someone had tipped him off that Bandy was a rustler.

On the first day, over five hundred head were crossed at the ford; and as each pair of cows was counted, Mexican fashion, Buffington Hall handed over four pesos. Big, silver dollars, still smelling of the earth where he had dug them up during the night, and the anxious customs collectors counted them over and over, to make certain there was no mistake. For the stern Captain Torres had stayed on at Double Adobes to be sure the tally was correct.

Then, the second day, he marched down to Fronteras where Fausto Parral held forth. It was a hard town, Fronteras, where every passing stranger was killed and robbed—and had been, for many years. An old penal colony, where the men were all wicked and the women set no store on their honor. No matter who the traveller, he was waylaid on the trail or murdered in his sleep—and at the head of this gang of inbred *ladrones* was Fausto Parral, their chief.

But Pancho Villa had been an outlaw himself and when the Troop of Death drew near, Fausto flung a red flag from his fort. The old presidio, where for two hundred years the Spanish soldiers had stood guard. But now their fighting blood had mingled with that of the convicts, producing a breed half-wolf, half-fox.

That night at a great fiesta they drank to the brave new days and that bravest of outlaws, Pancho Villa, who had given the people their liberty. Driving out the overlords, lifting the yoke from the poor peon, making even the common people free. But they, the bold men of Fronteras—whom some still called *ladrones*—they had always been free!

IT was a meeting very much to the liking of Captain Torres, who for years had followed the outlaw trail; and with wine and song and the dancing of women the inhabitants made them welcome. But duty called—and their chief, Pancho Villa, was a man not easily put off—so at the end of the fourth day the Troop of Death pressed on, to drive all traitors from the land. But before he left Torres warned Parral not to molest the Americans crossing cattle. They were paying into the treasury over a thousand pesos a day, which would go far towards buying cartridges for the army.

Day after day Buffington Hall crossed more cattle until he could hardly believe his good luck. His cowboys worked furiously to earn their five dollars a day, but in the immensity of the Hog Eye range the cows they got looked like nothing. It was an old Spanish grant, lying on both sides of the Line—a hundred miles south of the Rio Grande and eight or ten miles to the north. There was no stopping now, to hold the cattle and locate them on their new domain. They were thrown across anyway and started for the hills, to seek out feed and water.

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Not in two years had Buff had a break like this and he worked it to the limit. An honest General! An honest customs collector! It might never happen again, and he dug up the last pesos he had. Then, still riding his luck, he brought more out on credit, the check to go direct to Villa. He was at Presidio del Norte now—across the river from Presidio, Texas—and his enemies were marching in from the south. It was money he was after, to buy cartridges for his men, and he sent orders to let the cattle go. But in case the duty was not paid all the cattle left in Mexico would be forfeit.

At the end of the first week Buffington Hall stopped to think. With an honest general like Villa—and the range a cowman's paradise—perhaps he was making a mistake. Why shove his herds across onto the short grass of Western Texas when they were up to their bellies in rich grama? But the sight of the three "traitors," still swinging from their poles, sent him south for more cattle—and more. Next month, or next year, another army would march in. He was going to get those cattle *out*.

CHAPTER V

Peace Along the Rio Grande

THERE was peace along the lower Rio Grande, a condition so unusual, so preposterous on the face of it, that Captain Ross of the Texas Rangers rode down to Smugglers' Crossing to investigate. His beard had turned gray while he was fighting bandits and rustlers, and *ladrones* from the Mexican side, and still he lived on—a daily miracle. Of the three Parral brothers he had killed two, and Fausto had lost one eye. He too lived on, another miracle, for the Rangers were out to get him. But if one was brave the other was bold, if one was wary the other possessed guile; and for over fifteen years they had chased and ambushed each other—until now, at last, there was peace.

All along the trail, as he rode in, Captain Ross passed Hog Eye cattle. Big and fat, bred up by white-faced bulls till but little of the 'dobe remained; and, mixed in among them, there were yearlings and two-year-olds without an iron-mark on them. He glanced down at the ford, where still more cattle were crossing, and turned away up to the big house. Escondido, the Hidden, it was called, and yet it stood on a hill. That which was hidden was inside the battered walls, and she had waved to him from her tower.

Captain Ross was one Ranger who passed up the men and got his news from women and children—a benevolent, smiling man but a good detective withal, for he knew how the lonely love to talk. At the gates of Escondido he stopped and spoke to the Delaware Indian who stood guard there, day and night. One leg had been shot off, and Henry's fighting days were over—unless they brought the fight to him.

"Well, Henry," he observed. "Bringing the cattle out, eh?"

"Yes. Bring 'em out," grunted the Indian.

"That's good," nodded Ross. "Makes it nice for these rustlers that have their hideouts up under the Rim."

"Yes. Good," agreed Henry; and as the Captain stepped off he ordered a boy to take his horse.

A huge Delaware woman, quick as a cat in her beaded moccasins, stepped out of the kitchen to look; but, before she could speak, Anitra came running down the stairs.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Ross with a fatherly smile. "And how's my little sweetheart?"

"All right!" she said, taking his hand. "How are your other little sweethearts, up the river?"

She laughed and gave him a slap, but the Captain had gone through this before.

"O. K.," he reported, trudging after her up the stairs. "But of course you know, Anitra, that I love you best of all."

"Yes, that's what they all say," she laughed, sitting down in her lookout tower; and he gazed at her with a sigh.

"Prettier than ever!" he nodded, approvingly; and she brushed back her corn-colored hair. Her angel-blue eyes gazed up at him tenderly, her slender fingers twined in his, and he sat silent, saying nothing. "If I was twenty years younger," he began; then changed over to the business of the day.

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"How are my boys getting along?" he inquired. "Of course they come to see you often."

"No—never!" she cried, making a face. "They're down the river, now."

"What?" he exclaimed. "There's one boy that does, I know!"

"No! No, honestly—I never see him. And he used to come all the time."

"All the time, eh?" he repeated. "That was before I spoke to him about a Ranger tending to business. He's a good fellow, I know, but he's got other duties beside entertaining you young ladies."

"OH, did *you* drive him away?" she scolded. "I thought it was something I'd done. He's so shy, you know—not used to girls, I guess—are you sure he hasn't another one? Somewhere?"

"Nope! Nope!" he smiled; and sat brooding. "What's this I hear about his crossing the river? That's strictly against orders, you know."

"Yes, it is," she agreed, "and he might have been killed. But when he saw those Mexicans leading out Buster McCann he started right across. Alone!"

"Alone!" he repeated, incredulously. "I'll have to look into this!"

"But when the others saw him they followed right after him. And father and his cowboys, too."

"The other *Rangers?*" he exclaimed.

"Every one!" she declared. "And they got there just in time. Buster was up against the wall, and the firing-squad—but haven't you heard about it at all?"

"Well—yes. But nothing like that. He reported that Buster McCann had come back from Mexico. Buster was wanted for horse-stealing, you know?"

"Oh, really? Why, he's just devoted! He's been waiting around a week to shake hands with Win—I guess he knows he saved his life."

"Well, well," murmured the Captain. "How fortunate! It turned out he didn't steal the horse, after all. Did you see the animal—a black?"

"A magnificent creature! And Buster just loves him. But every place he goes they arrest him, he says, for stealing it. He wears such old clothes, you know."

"He's so big," chuckled the Captain, "he can't get any more—not down there where he's been hiding. They only make 'em boys' sizes, in Mexico. Is Buster working for your father?"

"Just while they're getting the cattle across. He's waiting to see Win, of course."

"Yes. And the next question is, what's Win waiting for? That's what I came down to find out."

"Well—" and she blushed—"he's after Parral."

"Parral, eh?" he frowned. "What'll you give me, Anitra, if I'll catch that rascal? Or kill 'im?"

"I'll give you the sweetest kiss you ever got in your life. And I'll never, never forget it."

"Does that go for Win and the other boys, too? or is it only for me?"

"Oh, for anybody!" she cried, desperately. "I'm getting to be afraid of him! And here I am, shut up like a nun, and nobody comes to see me!"

"Well, I'll let Win come—once," he promised consolingly. "But you'd better stay shut up a while. It's altogether too peaceful and quiet around here. I've got a hunch Fausto is planning something big."

"About Father—and crossing the cattle?"

"Very likely," he nodded. "I came down to see him and tell him he'd better quit. Those Hog Eye cows mean a livelihood for these bandits, and naturally they're going to strike back. Especially since Captain Torres has gone on down the river. Is Fausto still sending you poems?"

"Yes!" she snapped. "But I won't even look at them. I tear them up and give his messenger the pieces. That's what I think of *him.*"

"Yes? And who does he use for messengers?"

"Oh, any little boy or goat-herder he can catch. They're scared half to death, when they come."

"He's a bad man," pronounced Ross, rising to go. "You do well to be scared of him, Sweetheart. So you stay right here, and don't go outside the gate until—"

"Oh, not even for a walk?"

"Until the Rangers get Fausto," he ended.

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CHAPTER VI

One Eye Strikes Back

BUFFINGTON HALL had had his warning—and profited by it, too. He was getting out of Mexico. When Captain Ross told him to quit and quit quick there must be a reason, and a good one. The last cow had been crossed, and all his cowboys, but as he reined his horse into the river the head customs collector beckoned him back. They were bickering over their tally-sheets, which showed a difference of two cows, when two Mexicans driving burros plodded slowly down to the ford. Then, from their loads, they whipped out two muskets and rammed them against Hall's stomach.

"Let's go inside," suggested the leader; and Buff saw that he had but one eye.

It was Fausto Parral, disguised as a wood-chopper, and the cattleman knew he was trapped. The crooked customs collector who had called him back gave a Judas Iscariot smile and was gone, and Hall stepped inside the door.

The Double Adobes were two houses set side by side with the space of a third house between them; and across this gap a brush roof had been laid, making a shady outdoors porch. One building contained the stores of the cattle company, the other was the office of the guard.

"Seat yourself," bowed Parral, and Hall took the only chair. He was trying to think of something to say when the customs guards stepped in, loaded down with bags of pesos, and grinning expectantly. But Fausto waved them away.

"Put your money on the table and go," he said. "I have business with Mr. Hall."

"And our pay?" suggested Judas Iscariot.

"Later! Later!" snarled the robber chief, impatiently; and fixed his good eye on the cattleman.

"Señor Hall," he said, "I have you at my mercy. In the brush along the stream my men lie in waiting, so do not attempt to escape. They have anger against you for driving off these cattle and their greatest wish is to kill you. After all, is it not better to pay me my price and so cross the river unharmed?"

"Well, who knows?" shrugged Buffington, beginning to bargain. "And what is your price, Mr. Parral?"

"Very much or very little, as you decide," bowed the bandit. He sat down, mopped his bald head, and smiled.

"For yourself," he said. "Fifty thousand pesos. Otherwise I will have to hang you. But if your daughter will come over and kiss my hand—"

"She will not come!" burst out Hall in a fury.

"Perhaps not," returned One-eyed Parral; or, as the Mexicans called him, Tuerto. "She is a great lady, to be sure, and I am only a poor Mexican, forced by necessity to become a bandit. But as the ruler of many men I am not without the power to cross the river and take her."

"You try it," threatened Hall, "and my cowboys will kill you. But the ransom—I will pay it."

"Very well," agreed El Tuerto. "I felt sure you would do that—having heard what happened to others who refused. I am a man of my word and hold my honor above my life, and when the money is paid you are free. That is, if your daughter will kiss my hand and ask for her father's life."

"She will not come," answered Buffington, shortly.

"And why not?" inquired Tuerto.

"I have told her on no account to place herself in your power. But I will pay the ransom, if only to punish myself for not heeding the warning of Bigotes. The Captain of the Rangers."

"Bigotes!" scoffed Parral. "That bearded rascal? Was it he who warned you out? Well, tell him from me that he comes a little late if he thinks to save your life. My men know the Rangers and they laugh at them. I will write a little message to your daughter."

HE sat down on a box, a tall man with a long black mustache and a countenance both ferocious and sad; but the bald spot in the midst of his bristling hair gave a rather incongruous touch. It was more like the tonsure of a monk than the head-covering of a bandit chief; and his hands, kept paper-white by

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gloves, added a last, fantastic touch. Yet this was Parral, beyond a doubt, for he wore a white flap over one eye.

Hall watched him with helpless rage as he laid out paper and pen. A guard of rough *ladrones* lingered just outside the door, ready to cut off any attempt at escape. He was a prisoner, held for ransom, and that he could stand; but to see this foul brute inditeing a letter to his daughter made his hot Southern blood fairly boil. Fausto wrote with many flourishes, signing his name in full—that of his father and that of his mother, with the great scroll of his *rubrica* at the end. His family, so he claimed, had come from the *gente fine* before they were deported from Spain, but Buffington knew him for a rascal.

"Am I to blame?" sighed the bandit, looking up, "if I fall a victim of your daughter's charms? And is it asking too much if I request her to cross this river and ask for her father's life?"

"Yes, by the gods!" cursed Hall. "She knows how you entrap the husbands and lovers of those you seek to get in your power. And how treacherously you break your solemn promise—every woman in the country is afraid of you!"

"Then why?" flashed back Parral, "do they come and make love to me? I can pick and choose among them all, but there is none in our country like her. I cannot believe that, in a form so fair—"

"Say! Will you shut up?" blurted out Buffington in English; and Parral struck him to the floor with his gun.

"Lie there, you dog," he raged. "Why should I beg for what I can reach out and take? Your daughter shall be mine."

He sealed the letter angrily and gave it to a peon to deliver on the other side, and Hall found himself a prisoner. Two men came in and lashed him to a post and, while he tugged at his bonds, he heard the voice of Parral in hot altercation with the customs guards. Then a musket went off, there were yells, a frenzied chase, and Judas was brought back, panting.

"Swing him up!" ordered Fausto, following behind him. "And hang that other, who is dead, to a pole. I will show this Gringo whether I mean it or not—and those Rangers, on the other side. If they try to cross the river I will kill them all for attempting to invade my country."

He stood sweating and breathing hard as he watched through the doorway the execution of the Judas-faced guard. Then he stepped out into the open and raised a warning hand to the Americans on the other shore.

"The first man that shoots," he shouted. "I will hang the Gringo, too."

CHAPTER VII

A Little Help

THE sun was almost down when Sergeant Irons and his patrol rode up to Roofless Adobe; and as he glanced across the river he saw two more bodies, hung dangling from telegraph poles. A crowd of cowboys and Rangers stood silent behind Captain Ross, who turned and nodded grimly.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Hall had been taken prisoner. They're holding him in the Double Adobes, and the first shot that's fired he'll be hung."

"Yes?" responded Winchester. "That sounds like Fausto Parral."

"It is," answered Ross. "He wants fifty thousand pesos and—come here."

Irons stepped off his horse and listened in silence. Then he looked across the river again.

"Which house is he in?" he inquired.

"The left one, where you see that crowd by the door. But the first move we make, they'll kill him."

"Nope," decided Win. "That's all a bluff. It's Anitra the scoundrel is after. Can you keep her on this side?"

"She's taking it hard," admitted the Captain with a shrug. "You'd better go up and see her."

"Ump—umm!" replied Irons. "I'm resigning from the Rangers, right now; and going over there, after dark. Is that all right with you?"

"Yes, Win," smiled Ross. "All but the resigning. I may go over, myself."

"Give *me* a chance, first," begged the sergeant. "I believe I can get Hall back. But if the Rangers start across—"

"That's it," nodded Ross. "They'll kill him."

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"Well—maybe," assented Win. "But as long as you keep Anitra on this side of the Line—"

"I'll tell her," said the Captain. "Good luck."

Irons had swung out of sight and down into the brush—without even a glance at Escondido, where Anitra, dressed in white, stood waving at him. The twin dimples in his cheeks were drawn deep and his mouth was set in a line.

"I'm going to kill that rascal," he muttered. "But of course Buff Hall comes first."

It was dusk when he came to the bulkhead where the old ferry cable had been anchored and he was stripping down for a swim when he heard a noise behind him. Then the head of a black horse appeared among the willows, and on its back sat Buster McCann. He nodded silently and reined in with a grin.

"Could you use a little help?" he inquired. "I can talk that *pela'o*, fine."

"Well," began the sergeant; and stopped. He could *use* a man like Buster, but ordinarily he worked alone.

"Never mind about my getting killed," went on McCann. "You know—I don't care *what* happens to me. And another thing, Irons, I ain't forgot that time when you saved me from the wall." He reached out a giant paw and Win shook hands warmly.

"All right, Buster," he said. "Can you swim?"

"No. But my horse can. And they'll take us for bandits, then. Afoot is not so good."

"O. K.," agreed Irons. "But listen here, you do what I say—understand?"

"That's me," nodded McCann. "Jest suggestin'—that's all. And I'll talk the *pela'o*, of course."

"Talk all you want to, but don't forget what we're after—to bring out Buff Hall alive."

"And then?" inquired Buster with a grin.

"Well, I'm going to get Fausto Parral."

THEY took the river swimming, for here the water was deep, and with their blankets for serapes they edged through the willows towards the noise of the brawling ford. Irons halted and listened as they approached the first camp-fire, and swung back to ride in from the south. Then, behind the corrals, they tied their mounts and crept closer, armed only with their pistols. Win was peering around the corner at the guard outside the door when Parral himself stepped out.

The night was velvety black, with only the stars for light, but he knew him by the patch over his eye. It was white, and in the darkness it seemed to be doing the seeing—instead of the other, which was black. He went out and came back again, after walking to the ford, and they hid when he stepped inside. Again he came out and stood looking across the river—then sighed, and closed the door. Buster stirred in his wet clothes, Win wrapped himself closer, and they waited for they knew not what. Some break, that would give them a chance, if they had to lie shivering all night.

It was midnight and the moon was peeping over the towering cliff that ran down into Mexico on the east when from the camp of the bandits by the river's edge a huge musket went off—*bang!* There was a rush of startled men from the storehouse, a curse as Fausto bounded forth; then the Rangers across the stream answered back with a volley and in a second the battle was on. Captain Ross, to create a diversion, had ordered his men to fire, and Irons saw his chance.

Rushing up from behind like any other bandit he clubbed the guard over the head as he passed. Buster bashed in the door and by the light of a candle they found Hall, fighting against his bonds. Without a word Win cut him loose, Buster swung the door open again—they passed out and disappeared. Two hours later they were back on the other side, drinking coffee by the Rangers' fire.

CHAPTER VIII

A Promise

BUFF HALL was saved—without paying a cent—without Anitra begging his life from a bandit—but when they looked around to thank his brave rescuers, Winchester

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Irons and Buster were gone. They had played a waiting game and returned without a scratch; but that was not all, for them. Just before sun-up a 45-70 rifle began to talk from across the Line, and a 30-30 joined in. Mexican bandits jumped up running and went down in full stride. Horses galloped—men were fleeing everywhere.

The Americans at Roofless Adobe opened up with everything and knocked more of them into the dirt. When the battle was over Fausto Parral was a cloud of dust and Sergeant Irons had resigned. It was better so, not to implicate the Rangers, and he had taken on another job. He was out to get one-eyed Parral and he could not do that from the American side.

Now that the rescue was over and Anitra was safe he was so outraged by the gall of the bandit that he took after him on the lope. Buster McCann came back grinning, with two silver-mounted sombreros and leading a very good horse, and repeated Win's message, verbatim.

"'Tell the Captain I've resigned, as per our conversation of yesterday,' he said. 'And tell him I've taken that job.'"

"He said that?" demanded Buff Hall. "Well, Captain, you're losing the outfightinest sergeant that ever worked for forty a month. I only hope they never ketch *him* or Anitra will give right in."

He put his arm around her as she pressed forward to learn more, and Captain and Anitra exchanged smiles.

"Oh, he's all right," he said. "This isn't the first time that Win's invaded Old Mexico, lone-handed. Well, I'll have to let him go, for the good of the service; but I still feel he's one of my boys."

"But when will he be back?" she demanded, anxiously; and the Captain turned to Buster McCann.

"Right soon, Lady," he answered. "He said to tell you not to worry—"

"But why didn't he come back with you?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, he's hot-foot after Fausto Parral. He's so dog-goned mad at him writing you that letter—"

"Yes, yes," broke in Hall. "But he'll be back, darling."

"Especially," added Ross, "as he ain't a Ranger, any more. All he's got to do now is to entertain the ladies—and collect that two hundred, of course."

He laughed, they all laughed—and Anitra was almost gay; but her knight-errant did not return. Not till the third day, when a column of Villa soldiers marched in and occupied Double Adobes. Then she spied him, down in the willows on the American side, and leapt up to beckon him in. He rode forth, somewhat the worse for wear, and stopped to look again. She waved, and he galloped up to the gate, just as Anitra ran out to meet him.

"Oh—*Win!*" she cried, blushing; and dragged him up to her tower where she turned and faced him, breathlessly. But Winchester was blushing, too, and he let the great moment pass.

"Where have you been?" she asked at last; and suddenly he remembered his part. Or was it a part? For now he was smiling, and the dimples showed in his cheeks.

"I don't know," he said. "Does it matter?" And she knelt quickly and kissed his hand. Then she flung herself into his arms—he held her close.

"This is no place for you, Anitra," he said. "Not with that one-eyed scoundrel alive. I chased him to Fronteras, but he gave me the slip. You'll have to go to El Paso."

"Leave Father? Leave you? No, I'll stay!" she declared. "All at once I feel perfectly safe."

HE laughed and sat down, feeling his ten days beard, showing his hands, torn and scarred by the brush.

"You are a very pretty lady," he said, "to be kissing a man like me. Did I tell you, long ago, how much I love you? Well—*now*, then!" And he kissed her again. "Don't you know," he went on, "the first time I saw you I knew it was coming to this. But always before, when I tried to tell you—"

"Something happened! They always came!" she cried, eagerly.

"Or I was afraid," he confessed. "Somehow, I couldn't say it. But now!" He kissed her, and smiled. "Now I'll be here, to love and protect you."

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"And I won't need to go away, after all?"

"No!" he decided. "We can sit here in your tower and watch the country, together. They're stealing a world of cattle, but I'll put a stop to that. Give me eight or ten good men and I'll smoke up Fronteras until the last thieving renegade is dead.

"I'll break them of their cussedness—holding people for ransom, and writing you letters like that. I swear, when I heard it, I knocked a corner off the mountain getting back to head you off. And now listen, Anitra, I want you to make a promise. Will you do it? For me, you know."

"Yes, Win," she nodded. "What is it?"

"Well," he began; and then he shook his head. "No, you ought to go to El Paso," he said.

"I'm not going!" she declared. "I'm going to stay right here, right where you are."

"All right," he agreed, taking her hand. "I'll be glad to have you, of course. But when Fausto finds out how it is between us! Don't you see? He'll try to catch *me*. And then the low-browed rascal will write you another letter! But don't you do a thing. Understand? You stay right here and keep him guessing, and I'll attend to the rest."

"Yes, but Win," she objected. "He might really catch you. He might really intend to kill you. Wouldn't it be better to kiss his hand—"

"No, now promise! Never to yield. If he ever gets *you* he'll kill me like a dog. But so long as you say No I've got a chance to get away. Will you promise? Do you understand?"

"Well—yes," she sighed hesitantly. "But—"

"No—no 'buts,' " he protested tenderly. "Or would you rather go away? This is a hard country around here, and getting worse and worse; but I'm a better man than he is, any time. Only I want to be sure you'll never forget. Because I'm going to keep right on till I win!"

"Will you kiss me?" she asked, drawing nearer. "Then I promise—never to forget!"

CHAPTER IX

"No!"

IT was all arranged, then, and Irons rode back to camp to make himself more fit to be a lover—to shave his tawny beard, have a Ranger trim his hair and put on clean clothes, after a swim. But as he was mounting his horse to go, a Mexican dashed half-way across the ford and beckoned him out for a talk, they being forbidden to set foot in Texas.

"No!" shouted Winchester shaking his finger in the sign they had; but the Mexican was insistent. Then he took off his soldier's cap and Win recognized Captain Torres. He was in command again at the Double Adobes and had cut down the bodies of the customs guards—the Judas-faced collector who had led Hall into the trap, and the one who had tried to escape. But the three other bodies still dangled from the poles, where Torres had swung them, himself. For any man to cut them down meant death.

"No!" signalled Win; and then he changed his mind. He would need this man in the work he had to do, and Torres had ridden out to show him there was no treachery. He was a hard man, but with the rugged honesty of his chief. Irons laughed and rode clear across.

"Good morning, my Captain!" he hailed, with a salute; and Torres regarded him strangely.

"Good morning," he replied. "You were here when all this happened? Then perhaps you can explain about *this?*"

He waved his hand toward the sacks of silver, which still lay stacked on a table.

"That," said Winchester, "is the duty on the cattle which Mr. Hall has crossed."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the Captain. "But why is it here? Why is it that no one has taken it?"

"I will tell you the story from the first," answered Win. "And then, with your permission, I will go. The young lady in that tower is waiting for me to come—my Captain will understand."

"Perfectly," responded Torres, grimly. "But there is work to be done here. Pancho Villa has sent me down to inquire into this matter, and why the

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duty has not been paid; and here I find the money piled up on this table and my collectors hung on poles."

"That," replied Win, "is the work of Fausto Parral. You will have to talk to him."

"So *you* say," retorted Torres, "but I am informed by many Mexicans that you killed these customs guards, yourself."

"No," said Irons, "they were surprised by Parral just as Mr. Hall was finishing the tally. He was held for ransom, but the two collectors were killed. One was shot as he ran and his body strung up, and the other was hung by Fausto. Then, in the night, Mr. Hall escaped—"

"But who are these dead men who lie all about here? And who was it that shot them down?"

"I, for one," answered Winchester, boldly. "They are the followers of that base rascal, Parral. After Mr. Hall escaped I came back to punish them, and chased him clear to Fronteras."

"Yes?" observed Torres, and looked at him again. "Do you not know that the soil of Mexico is sacred?"

"*Sí, Señor.* But in the excitement of the moment—"

"*Que caramba!*" muttered the Captain, turning to glance at the sacks of pesos. "But you did not take the money!"

"NO. That is the property of General Villa, who permitted us to cross the cattle. And now, if you will excuse me—"

"Oh, certainly, certainly!" responded Torres; and stood watching him as he crossed the stream.

"What a man!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands. But his thin-faced lieutenant only shrugged.

"Perhaps," he began; but Torres cut him off.

"No, no!" he said. "The money is there. And if all Americans are thieves —I must talk with this American again! He has done nothing wrong or he would not ride across to meet me."

Win was sitting in the watch-tower with the fair-haired Anitra when her father came galloping up.

"There is a Mexican down at the crossing," he announced, "who says Captain Torres wishes to speak with you."

"Not now Father!" protested Anitra. "Win has just come back from seeing him, and I want him to myself."

"Tell the Captain," said Irons, "I will be over tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" burst out Hall. "Tomorrow may be too late. Those Mexicans are getting dangerous. Go over and smooth them down."

"I'll go," flashed back Win, "when I get good and ready. Ask the Captain to be so kind as to excuse me."

"Huh!" grunted Hall, swinging his horse around. And Anitra took Win's hand.

"You darling!" she murmured. "That was a kind of test, for me. It just came over me as I listened for your answer—now I'll see if he really loves me!"

"Well, you see," he answered, smiling. "And the man doesn't live that can take me away from here now. If your Old Man doesn't like it he knows what he can do. This is our day — isn't it, Sweet?"

"Isn't it wonderful!" she sighed. "But I know it can't last. There's always something, you know."

"I've seen Torres once and told him all I'm going to, until he gets that bad look out of his eye. These Mexicans have filled him up until he's dead certain it was Americans that murdered those collectors. Let 'em sweat for a while—we've got our cattle out. But your dad will never be satisfied.

He gazed out across the country—the wide river-bottom, the mountains beyond, the grassy plains still dotted with cows —and settled down by her side.

"It's all his," he said, "but he makes himself a slave to it. Some day these Mexicans will get him."

"What—again?" she cried out, anxiously.

"Again," he answered. "Unless he keeps his hands off, now he's turned this crossing job over to me."

"Yes—but then they'll get *you!*" she protested.

"Well, maybe," he admitted. "And then again, maybe not. Shall we quit, while we're lucky? Shall we go?"

"Oh, you're so wonderful!" she sighed. "So lucky—so brave! Don't you think you can handle it, Win? Be-

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cause if Father ever tries to bring those cattle out alone—"

"O.K.," he laughed. "We'll stay."

CHAPTER X

The Fighting Sign

"NOW listen," said Winchester Irons, looking his father-in-law-to-be in the eye as he came hurrying down to camp. "We're going to do this my way or not at all; so make up your mind, right now. I don't want you, nor Jack Moore, nor anybody else, trying to tell me how to handle these Mexicans. Pancho Villa is honest and I'm going to be honest, too. We're going to pay every dollar of that duty."

"Well, *pay* it!" squalled Buffington, in a pet. "Both collectors are dead—I've got the only tally—"

"All the same," nodded Win, "We're going to pay." And they did.

Hall made a special trip to Presidio del Norte and put the check in Villa's hand. The bandit chief watched him dumbly, his bulging eyes half glazed as if he did not fully understand.

"Very well," he said, at last. "Now what does he want — this man who is named after a rifle?"

"A safe-conduct, signed by you, to travel through Mexico; and protection from Fausto Parral."

Villa's eyes began to twitch and he turned to his secretary.

"Write this," he directed. " 'This man is my friend.' I will attend to Fausto Parral."

He sat waiting as the scribe wrote out the simple words, then carefully signed his name. It was all the writing he knew how to do, but that signature was the law in northern Mexico. Irons rapped it in oiled silk and pinned it inside his sleeve before he rode back to see Torres.

A cold, wintry blast was howling past the doors, but the soldiers crowded out as he approached. They were little men, but hard, of the true bandit breed; and only a Torres could command them. He had been the greatest bandit of them all, when Villa was nothing but a thief, and even so he had troubles enough.

"Hah! Don Rifle!" he exclaimed, with a salute; but Winchester did not catch the joke. If the Mexicans wanted to give him a name they could pronounce, that was nothing to the business in hand He had squared himself with Villa, Hall was going to brand the Hog Eye cattle —but these soldiers had a sullen look.

"Well, my Captain," he said, "have you investigated this affair and found out who it was that killed your guards?"

"Yes, Don Rifle," bowed Torres. "It was that traitor, Fausto Parral. The chief has given me orders to punish him."

"Good!" returned Win. "We will be glad to assist you. But what is this new name?"

"That is what Don Pancho calls you. We cannot pronounce the other—it is too hard."

"Very well," bowed Irons. "Don Rifle it is. I am honored to be named by your chief."

"He is a great man truly, and has declared himself your friend — the one Americano that speaks the truth and pays has debts. I am ordered to assist you in everything."

"A thousand thanks!" answered Irons. "Then, with your permission, I will ride down into Mexico and scout out the country we will work. Besides the Mexican vaqueros we will hire to handle the cattle there will be eight or ten Americans I can trust. But when Fausto receives the news that your Troop of Death is back—"

"HE will not trouble you in the least," stated Torres; but the soldiers gave Don Rifle black looks. They had not forgotten the royal welcome they had received when their *tropa* had marched to Fronteras—the wine, the women, the long nights of dancing—but here there were no women at all. There was nothing to do but crouch behind their brush shelters or stand a futile round of guards—they who for two years had had the looting of many villages and the excitement of fighting *Federales*. Real Federals, the proper enemies of the common people, not men who had been their friends.

"*Adios!*" said Irons, with a salute to the captain; and rode on down into Mexico.

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It was a country he had been in before—but secretly, on lone scouts. Now he jogged down the wide road on his hardy blue roan and the Mexicans could like it or not. There were cattle on every side, though thousands had been stolen; and across the wide prairie as far as he could see the grama grass waved its black tips. A Spanish Grant, a border empire, but deserted for two years—uninhabited even by Mexicans.

To the right and to the left, twenty miles and more away, blue mountains with high crags and jog-saw outlines shut them in with misty walls. Far to the south another mountain cut them off—and over that divide lay Chihuahua City, the capital of Villa's government. It was his good will alone which had restored to its owner this one-time cowman's paradise.

For three days Irons scouted through the eastern hills, looking out the trails and passes but working always towards the stronghold of Parral. Not by intention, perhaps, but following an instinct to crowd in on his enemy and fight. This was Fausto's country. The trails were worn deep from driving off Hog Eye cattle.

All the people who lived there were his *gente*, but they did not molest Don Rifle. Their spies had brought the news that he was protected by General Villa, and so they let him pass.

But on the fourth day, near the village of San Miguel, as he was swinging back towards home, he cut the trail of a herd of cattle and picked up a freshly-branded calf. It was burned in the iron of Bandy Storms' outfit—the Bull-Head, with headquarters back in Texas—and they owned no cattle in Mexico. Here was something big — something that needed looking into—he followed their tracks on the lope. But when the trail led into a narrow defile he circled high and gazed down from above.

In the round valley below a gang of Mexicans were roping and branding, and through his glasses he could see the Bull's Head earmarks. They were stealing the big mavericks and holding them in this valley, to be kept until their brands peeled. Then, once across the river, they could be sold to the Bull's Head rustlers and turned loose on their range.

IRONS lay on the rim, his rifle shoved out before him, and watched them as they worked the herd. Parral's men, romping and sky-larking. They would rather steal Hog Eye beef than have their breakfast in bed. They were all wearing guns, but the question was—would they fight? He drew down on their leader and knocked him out of the saddle the first shot, and every man ran for his horse. Then they poured out of the valley like the clatter-gates of hell and Winchester Irons raced after them. Not until they took shelter behind the walls of Fronteras did he halt and make a sign with both hands. It was a disgraceful gesture he had learned from the *pelados*, and certainly called for a fight. Especially as now, for the first time, they perceived that he rode alone. They spurred out again, shooting—and so he led them on until they charged in on Double Adobes.

"Sons of a thousand fathers!" cursed Torres as they fled. And that same night he marched on their town.

CHAPTER XI

Mutiny

IT had been the order of Villa from the first that Fausto Parral should be punished, but Captain Torres had put it off. Now he came on so fast that he surrounded Fronteras at dawn, and Irons and ten Americans rode with him.

"Wait, now!" he said. "Señor Irons."

"Hell, no," answered Don Rifle; and began shooting. His cowboys scattered out and hid in the high hills above the town, and bandit after bandit fell dead. Inside their adobe houses they were safe, but when they thrust out their guns the bullets found them. The Troop of Death fired by volleys, the Americans aimed to kill, and in a few hours the white flag went up. Eleven outlaws lay dead, twenty-four surrendered, but Fausto Parral escaped. At the first shot he had dashed down the hill into the river, together with the pick of his men.

That was their way of fighting—always to shoot from ambush, never to make a stand when surprised—and Captain Torres took possession of the town.

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Both he and his men had been entertained there before and they did not treat the people too hard. Under orders from General Villa they had captured the bandit stronghold, and the twenty-four bandits were held prisoners; but the eleven who had been killed had been shot by the Americans, and none of the rest were executed.

The town was left as it was when they marched back to Double Adobes, but Winchester Irons was satisfied. He had shown the Fronteras Mexicans he could shoot and that the forces of the Government were behind him. Now he rushed in his cowboys and started the round-up before Parral could strike back. The Hog Eye cattle were a gold-mine for Fausto—he would not give them up, that was sure—but while he rallied his bandits and sent out spies again Buffington Hall hired every man in sight. American cowboys, in case of a fight, Mexican vaqueros to comb the range, cooks and teamsters to haul in supplies. One outfit gathered the cattle, the other brought them in and Hall himself put them across. And every time a cow-brute crossed the Rio Grande, Pancho Villa received two pesos.

Never before had the Mexicans been so kind, the officials so willing to oblige; and while the going was good Hall worked day and night, for he knew that something would pop. The whole country was in a turmoil, the common people up in arms, and Fausto Parral was riding the hills; but Villa sent down more soldiers to guard the herds and Win Irons hit the trail with ten men.

The ten nerviest gun-men in Texas, and they gave Fausto the chase of his life; but, being a horse-thief, the bandit leader outran them. He had the pick of every mount on both sides of the river and the *paisanos* were his friends to a man. Wherever he rode they gave him food and water and killed his trail with their goats after he passed. Win rode hard but Parral rode harder, in a frenzy of twisting and turning, until at last all trace of him was lost.

Winchester's horses were ridden down, his men gaunt from hunger when, dead beat, they returned to Double Adobes. But here they encountered a patrol of soldiers who signalled them to stop. This signalling was a part of Captain Torres' strict military plan to protect his garrisons from surprise, but for Irons the system did not work out. To keep the lurking bandits from stealing his code Torres changed signals twice a week, and Win's were of the week before. They wig-wagged back and forth until at last, in disgust, he dropped his flag and rode straight in.

AFTER all, Torres' lieutenant knew him well; and with his fighting men behind him Irons moved into the warehouse, though he sensed that something was wrong. Captain Torres was not there, some of the soldiers were drunk; and among their *soldaderas*, or camp-followers, were several women that he knew. The widows of bandits who had been killed at Fronteras, and they gave him poisonous glances as he passed. But the Americans were hungry and worn and, after cooking a late supper, they went to sleep on the floor.

Weariness and failure had made Irons forgetful of danger, but when he woke with the first dawn he remembered the women, and the bad look they had had in their eyes. After the way of their kind, when their husbands were killed, they had become the *soldaderas* of their conquerors—but every woman was a spy! Captain Torres had been negligent to allow them about his camp, for they would report all his movements to Parral.

As Win lay thinking there was a stir outside the door—sandalled foot-steps, the clank of a gun. He rose up from his hard couch and strapped on his gun-belt, tiptoed over and peeped through a crack. He was gazing into the eye of Saturnino Cota, the lieutenant with the thin-lipped smile. The very man, indeed, who had commanded the firing-squad when Buster had been put against the wall. Winchester jerked open the door—stepped out—and the muzzles of ten rifles were shoved against his stomach.

"Over here!" beckoned Cota; and ten more guards stood him up against the wall. There was murder in their eyes—and the women! Now they were smiling.

"Your gun!" demanded Cota, still talking by signs; but Irons shook his head. He could draw his pistol and shoot this traitor dead before he could move a hand. But what then? Well, they

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would kill him. Every rifle was cocked —and his boys lay asleep, inside.

It was mutiny. Captain Torres had been killed, and the soldiers were itching to shoot. All they waited for was an order—a sign. Then a slim, tense-faced woman began to whisper to the sergeant, standing tip-toe to reach his ear, and Irons gave his gun up—quick. The sirens of Fronteras were urging their men on to avenge the death of their husbands—and this sergeant was a snarly-mouthed brute. Win passed over his gun-belt—just as the door opened again and one of his cowboys stepped out.

CHAPTER XII

Women of Fronteras

WINCHESTER had sworn when he went into Mexico that he would never be taken alive. But the sight of a woman whispering something to a sergeant, had made him change his mind. She was a very pretty woman of a certain type—such as sergeants and bandits fall for—and by the look in her eye he knew just exactly what she was asking for. Not very much, if this was another revolution—but Win suddenly decided to live. So he beat her to it by the fraction of a second and gave up his gun to Cota. Now another decision lay before him.

Inside that warehouse lay ten as nervy men as the hot sun of Texas ever shone on. He had hired them as gun-fighters and, left alone, they would fight. But they did not have a chance. Some would shoot their way out—they would kill a lot of Mexicans—but the soldiers had them in the door. Especially this tall cowboy with a pistol on his hip, taking one quick look around before he went for his gun—and ten rifles all pointing at his belly.

Win beckoned him—swiftly, smilingly —and the Texan lined up against the wall. There was something coming off which he could not understand, but he had learned to have confidence in his chief. The Mexican soldiers were looking snaky, the women like she-devils, the air was charged with the will to kill; but he gave up his gun-belt—he quit. One by one, they came out and Irons motioned them over, smiling, while Lieutenant Cota looked on, grimly.

This was not what he had been led to expect and his face showed relief, if anything. But the women! They were fawning upon their men, urging them openly to shoot, and with a rattle-snake look in their eyes that showed them of the true bandit breed. Last of all to come out was Buster McCann, and he took it without batting an eye. Better than any of them he could read the black hearts of these Jezebels, and he saw he was as good as dead.

"Say your prayers, American!" jeered the snarly-mouthed sergeant; but the lieutenant whipped out his sword. Once let these men get away from him and he would receive a bullet in the back.

"Soldiers!" he said, beginning a long-winded, political speech, such as went with occasions like this, "you have won a great victory, truly. In the name of Liberty, El Pueblo has spoken. The People have risen up to overthrow tyranny and rebuke cowardly Texanos; who, through their tool, Captain Torres, have deprived the Mexicans of their rights. They have swarmed into our country, driving off thousands of cattle, attacking our towns, murdering our citizens—"

"*Ai!*" wailed the women; the soldiers began to curse; but Cota held up his hand.

"But now, *amigos*, that tyrant is dead. That Captain who drove us, against our will, to shoot down our friends at Fronteras. I ask you to give Vivas for the man who—"

He paused, the door of the adobe swung open, and Fausto Parral strode out. He was smiling.

"*Viva!*" yelled the soldiers. "*Viva* Parral! *Viva* Villa!"

"*Viva Mexico!*" responded Parral; and from their hiding places in the willows his bandits shouted in reply. Then, from his belt, Parral drew a bloody machete and began to longer, windier speech. It was the knife which had slashed off the head of Captain Torres, and he was the man who had swung it.

"And now," ended the bandit chief, "I ask only this man as my reward."

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And he pointed the blade at Irons.

"No, no!" protested the Lieutenant, coming to life. "I have arrested that American in the name of General Villa and no one shall take him away from me."

IT had suddenly occurred to Cota that, unless he made a stand, this one-eyed bandit would sweep him off his feet—confiscate his treasure, execute his prisoners and take his soldiers into his band. They would join in a minute, these wildly cheering *soldados*—and then *his* head would come off.

"No, hombre," he ended, "it is necessary to think or we will find ourselves hung up to poles. Don Pancho is our *jefe,* and his commands must be obeyed. I am ordered to bring this Gringo to Presidio."

"But have I not earned him?" wheedled Parral. "Who was it that killed your Captain? Who was it that told you how to take these Texans prisoners without firing a shot? And they are dangerous men."

"I surrendered," broke in Irons, "because I respected Lieutenant Cota and that great General who commands him—Pancho Villa. That is why there was no shooting—why we gave our guns up peaceably—"

"Shut your mouth!" ordered the sergeant, giving him a jab with his rifle-barrel; and all the soldiers burst out laughing. It gave them delight to see the Americans in their power, to see their leader take blow after blow. In a moment all discipline was cast aside and they stripped their prisoners of everything—their spurs and jack-knives, their saddles and fancy rigging, even their guns as the riot swept on.

Lieutenant Cota could do nothing, once the looting began, and the Americans stood to take a beating; but they stood together, declining to be tied, ready to strike at a word from Win, and the soldiers let them go. No profit and little honor would come to them if they ever came to blows with their prisoners; and, when the turmoil was over and every man had his loot, they consented to take orders once more. Cota flashed his sword, his men lined up and drove the last of Parral's bandits from their camp—but Fausto himself defied them, to gloat over the defeated Don Rifle.

"Ahhr, Gringo!" he scoffed, folding his arms and staring insolently at Irons. "You have been whipped—outwitted—by women. These that you see here are not common *soldaderas*—they are wives made widows who have sworn an oath to avenge their husbands' deaths. They are women of Fronteras, and now they but wait to see you die against the wall. And these Americans that are with you—were they there at the battle? Were you, sir? And you? And you?"

He passed down the line while the Mexicans looked on, and every Texan answered: "Yes." Even those who had not been there. They would not take advantage of their partners in this desperate bout with death and, when they all had answered, Irons laughed. For a man with two dimples and flashing white teeth he very seldom smiled, but in times of danger his dimples appeared, as if he were enjoying the show.

It was, indeed, a show—play-acting of a sort—and while Fausto orated Win listened patiently, hoping at last to get a break. Lieutenant Cota had arrested him and all his men, disarmed them and set them against the wall; but he had said nothing of trials and executions, for his own life hung by a hair. Captain Torres had been killed by this same glib-tongued orator who was trying to win over his men.

HALF the soldiers went to breakfast, but to the Americans they gave nothing—and that was a very bad sign. The Mexicans never waste good food on men who are about to die. There was a dust to the south, the bobbing heads of many horses; and Parral gave a high, exultant whoop.

"Brothers!" he shouted. "Do you see these soldiers coming, bringing prisoners in from below? The man-killing Texanos who have been running off our cattle were no match for these bravest of men. Only two weeks ago, after the battle of Fronteras, they marched through here under guard as prisoners. Now they return in the uniform of General Villa and the Americans fear for their lives."

He paused, laughing scornfully as

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Jack Moore's cowboys came in sight, lined up before the guns of their guard.

"Gringos!" he taunted, "once more you have been whipped by women. The stout-hearted women of Fronteras, who saved their husbands from jail. In this company of soldiers you will see the faces of prisoners that you took when you attacked our town. When they were marched to Juarez their women followed after them; and if they sought favor with the enemy in any way they could, the greater honor to them. They appeared before the Colonel and pleaded for their husbands — honorable and peaceful citizens, as they could prove by all who knew them—and loyal to Villa and his Government. Ho, ho! I must laugh. These women talked so well, and smiled so knowingly, that the Colonel sent their men home as soldiers.

"Men like these," he went on, "knowing the lay of the country—and hating Parral, of course—they could be of great service in running him down. And so he made them *soldiers!*"

He glanced mockingly at Lieutenant Cota—who flashed back a look of hate—and suddenly Fausto took command.

"Put these Gringos in the warehouse." he ordered, "before they mix with the others that come. Go on in there—you!" he shouted, and ran to fling open the door.

Irons gave one look and led the way obediently. It would give him a chance to get his men together, where they could talk and make some plan. The others followed quickly—Parral stood by the door. But as Buster went past, seeing Fausto's blind eye towards him, he struck out backhanded and knocked him flat without even breaking his stride.

CHAPTER XIII

A Friend of Villa

THIS was the break for which Irons had been waiting—he, a man of action, compelled to do nothing, to accept taunts and rebukes and revilings—and when he saw Fausto go down he laughed. They all laughed, except Buster McCann, who professed to be surprised.

It was a great come-down for Parral, after his grandstand plays, to find himself stretched out in the dirt; and not the last to join in the uproar was the saturnine Lieutenant Cota. He had had more than enough of the bandit's foxy ways, and Fausto's comedy-fall gave him his chance. Throwing back his head he burst into a loud guffaw, and One-Eye slunk away. The soldiers were still laughing when they were suddenly lined up in response to Cota's sharp commands.

The mood for executions and a big killing had passed, and at his orders the Americans were mounted and started up the river. It had saved their lives, that scornful slap of Buster McCann, and got them out of town alive; but, once on the trail, the soldiers from Fronteras, made themselves as obnoxious as their master. Drunk and disorderly, and mounted on horses which had formerly been these cowboys' pride, they charged up and down shooting off their guns, sending the bullets closer and closer to their heads.

"Were you there when Fronteras was attacked?" they demanded jerking Irons out of the line, and he laughed as he answered:

"Yes!"

"And you?" they cried, snatching another man out.

"Yes!" he said; and they put him with Winchester.

"And you?" They picked out another, and this man also answered:

"Yes!"

Not until the last American had admitted his guilt did the Mexicans see the joke; for here were twenty-seven men, all confessing, when only eleven had been present. It was a point of honor with the Texans not to accept any advantage over the rest, though everyone of them might be hung for it. They answered the question lightly, with laughs and grim jests, and Lieutenant Cota ordered them released. The only one that they knew had been there was Winchester Irons, their leader; and they kept him by himself, under guard.

But he was the particular American they could not afford to execute. They might go the same way if they hung him to a pole, and yet they hated him most. Cota guarded him, personally; and, when they were camped, he kept him from

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speaking to the rest. But it was understood among the Americans that at the first attempt to kill one of them the others would join in the fight.

That evening the Mexicans killed a beef for themselves, but to their prisoners they gave nothing. All *they* had was a sack of corn-meal which one of them had brought along, and at dark Buster McCann slipped away. Wrapped up in his single blanket, his face hidden by his sombrero, he elbowed his way in towards the beef-carcass, tearing off meat to roast by the fire. Then, crouching with the soldiers, he cleaned rib after rib while he listened to their talk. Some favored a hanging, some were for shooting them as they ran—and that, they said, was the better way, being authorized by the *ley de fuga.*

BUSTER bowed his head low as a gust of wind swept by, but the brim of his big hat flapped back. Then a heavy hand grabbed him from behind, and the sergeant stared into his face.

"*Bribon!*" he cursed, taking a swing at his jaw; and Buster went over backwards, laughing.

"Ah, *compadres,*" he pleaded as they kicked and abused him. "Have mercy—I had to have some meat. My big guts were eating up my little ones—can you blame me for stealing a rib?"

"Get out of here!" ordered the sergeant and with a parting kick he booted him back to his camp.

But not for a bellyful of beef alone had Buster entered the enemy's camp. In a few, whispered words Irons had asked him to play the spy, since he stood the best chance to escape. So he clowned his way out of it and passed the news on to Win, who sent word for all of them to stand pat. To submit to abuse without striking back—and under no circumstances to run. It was to drive them to this that the Mexicans starved and mistreated them—and at the first break the shooting would begin.

The Americans slept cold around their fire that night, but as morning approached and more fuel was piled on they fell into fitful sleep. Then it came—a volley of shots from the hillside above—a yell, and bullets striking into their fire. They leapt up, ready to run, and the soldiers from Fronteras turned over and fetched up their guns. But for all the shower of bullets not a man had been hit, and from the darkness Irons laughed.

"Never mind that, boys," he said; and they escaped the *ley de fuga,* the Mexican law of flight. By that law any prisoner who fled could be shot down and left by the trail, but this first attempt to stampede them had failed. The second came that morning when, passing through a narrow defile, the same enemies who dogged their trail opened fire from above, knocking down a shower of gravel and rocks.

"That's One-Eye!" jeered Winchester, looking up through the cloud of smoke; and Cota came running back. There was no love lost now between him and the bandit chief, and when he saw the white-patched eye peering down over the edge he broke into high-pitched curses. They were nearing Presidio, the headquarters of Villa, and a wholesale killing of American prisoners might send them all to execution.

"Ah, goat's son! One-Eyed woman-stealer!" he yelled at Parral. "Would you rob me of my prisoners? The time is past for that. You should have killed them at Double Adobes, when this baboon, No Clothes, slapped you flat in the dust with one hand. Now but fire another shot and I will order my men to kill you—these loyal soldiers of Villa who care for nothing for these others who have bought their freedom from prison with their women."

He turned to laugh at the men from Fronteras, whose wives had saved them from jail, and his own soldiers whooped and shouted. Parral yapped back at him, but his pride was touched and he ducked out of sight with his men. After that the loyal soldiers formed a body-guard about the Americans—the same Gringos they had been so eager to kill—until they marched into Presidio del Norte.

IT was a town on a high ridge, far above the brawling ford that led the Chihuahua caravans into Texas. A town full of soldiers who gazed at them curiously, yet hurried on about business of their own. Big, brawny mountaineers from the fastnesses of Durango rode by in their gold-mounted hats—Pancho Vil-

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la's Dorados, his Golden Guards — to whom war was only a game. A game and an excuse to get the best of everything, and to go out at the end, still fighting. The town was in a furor, with dead men in the streets, and they were mopping up after the fight.

"Take your prisoners to the church!" ordered a captain, waving them on; and as they aproached the great Cathedral there was a rattle of rifle-fire and the big bell in the tower went: *Bong.*

"That is for the dead!" shouted the crowd that followed after them; and the Americans soon learned what they meant. The long wall of the church was being used for executions, and as each soul left its earthly tenement the bells rang out a requiem. Little bells and big, and Cota's soldiers were all a-grin as they lined up their prisoners and waited.

They had not had the nerve to shoot them on the trail—they had boggled the killing at Double Adobes—but here were Villa's soldiers shooting man after man, and soon it would be their turn. The crowd was growing bigger every minute as the news swept through the town—a great capture of Texanos, caught red-handed slaying innocent Mexicans. The desperate gang of Texans who had attacked Fronteras and killed so many of its people. And now they had murdered Captain Torres—but Lieutenant Cota had taken them prisoners.

The lieutenant had added this to protect himself—and his mutineers had turned back to loyal soldiers. It would not be long before their rifles made good their word and silenced the Texans forever. They stood against the wall, looking on grimly as the populace swarmed about them; and as the shout of: "Kill them!" rose higher and higher Irons glimpsed a flash of white in the mob. It was the eye-patch of Fausto Parral and as he urged the people on he grinned at the Texans wickedly.

There was another fusillade as a firing-squad set a traitor against the wall, and the huge bell in the tower went: *Bong.* Then as the little, balanced bells rolled over and over, ringing out their chime of death, a high officer spurred in and looked the Americans over. He questioned Cota—who rattled off his answer—and the soldiers who had been at Fronteras; but when he came to Irons and the crowd of Texans behind him, he paused and regarded them doubtfully.

"Kill the Americans!" shouted a voice that Win knew; but not even to satisfy Parral could this colonel order them killed.

"*Mata le, los Americanos!*" roared the crowd; but there were soldiers across the river. A squadron of United States cavalry, which had only that day ridden in.

"My Colonel," began Winchester, stepping forth and saluting "with permission I wish to present this letter. It is signed by General Villa, himself."

He reached inside his sleeve and tore loose the package which had been concealed up his sleeve so long. His ace in the hole—his last bet, but a good one. The colonel embraced him when he read those few words. Before the great crowd, which could not understand, he took him in his arms and gave him the polite *abrazo,* due a gentleman. Anyone who was a friend of Don Pancho was too good a man to be killed.

CHAPTER XIV

The Bells of Death

WHAT a change there was in the crowd when this Colonel of General Villa's jumped down and gave. Win the *abrazo*—that formal embrace, given one gentleman by another as a sign of affection and respect! And Lieutenant Cota, that turn-coat traitor who had tried so hard to have him executed! He leapt to obey when Colonel Aguilar ordered all the Americans' horses returned. Their arms, their saddles and bridles, their spurs and quirts—everything that had been taken away from them.

He was in a cold sweat, afraid for his life, and the men from Fronteras cringed—but Irons said nothing of their mutiny. A word from him would send them all to their death, but for this last time he spared them. There was revolt in the air, one *cuartelazo* had been put down, but another might be in the making. All he wanted was his horses and arms and a chance to get away from there—quick.

The Colonel was called away; the crowd surged back, hooting; and Cota's

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soldiers began to palter and delay. They claimed the spurs and quirts they had stolen as their own, and as Win waited a lieutenant spurred up to him.

"My friend," he said, "I have been requested to inform you that there is every reason for haste. A telegram has been received at the office, ordering you Americans to Chihuahua City for trial, but it has not been delivered at headquarters. I hope you understand what I mean."

"Perfectly," bowed Winchester, and rushed down among his men.

"Never mind," he whispered. "Take what you can get—and come on."

He was mounting his horse to go when another officer rode in beside him.

"There is fighting down by the ford," he said. "Do not try to cross the river. Go back the way you came—I say this as a friend."

"A thousand thanks," responded Irons; and as they loped down the hill the Americans heard the first of the shooting. Rifles barked here and there, men were galloping through the night, there were shouts of *Viva Villa*. But down by the river there were other vivas, and a sudden, defiant volley. It had all the earmarks of another revolution, but Winchester did not stop to find out.

In times like this the Mexicans were at their worst and the Americans had escaped re-arrest by a hair. Escaped abuse and starvation in a military prison —but here, at least, they were free. Win turned off down the rough trail they had come up on and halted outside the town.

"Load your guns, boys," he said. "We've taken enough off of these pelados. Now fight your way through hell if you have to, but never be taken alive."

"That's the talk!" cheered the Texans and they rode down the river through the night until their starved-down horses quit. They camped off the trail, where the grass was good, and shortly afterward a clatter of hoofs went past. Even in the dark they knew it was soldiers—following after them, but not too fast. It was a long trail and a rough one, with a thousand natural ambushes—and high cliffs, just ahead.

ONCE past the narrow defile that went between them the Americans would be at Rocky Ford, but their horses had given out. They were cut off on both sides by hostile Mexicans, but now they had lost all fear. At dawn they killed a yearling and filled up on beef, not even trying to hide their fire. For four days they had starved while their captors fed high. Now they ate the whole yearling and felt better.

But as the smoke of their fire in the basin revealed their presence to the enemy ahead an armed man stepped out on the cliff. He stood out on a point in a statuesque pose as if warning them that they were watched, and Buster began to curse. Another appeared, further on, and Win beckoned McCann aside.

"How'd you like to go along and help me kill those rascals?" he asked. "They've got us hemmed in and we've got to do something, damned quick."

"All right," agreed Buster. "And I know this country, too. But tell me this, Mr. Irons — who's going to run this scout?"

"Why, how do you mean?" inquired Winchester.

"Well, I happen to know a trail that goes around behind that point—"

"You're the boss, then," answered Irons. "And, just to show you what a good fellow I am, I'm going to let you go first."

"Heh, heh," laughed McCann. "I'll go you, at that. And while we're climbing up the boys can wait right here, in case they come after us from Presidio."

"Not a chance," answered Win. "They're too busy fighting each other to chase after a tough bunch like us. But these lookouts must be some of Fausto's men that got ahead of us last night, and I aim to spoil their game at the start. Then the boys can ride through the canyon and we'll shoot our way down to Rocky Ford."

"Well, boys," directed Buster, turning back; "jest wait here a few minutes while me and the boss scout around. Keep your guns right handy, your eyes open and your mouths shut—and watch me!" he ended, swelling up.

"That's right," nodded Irons. "And when we get those lookouts—"

"Ride right through the pass," ended McCann.

Buster was feeling good, with his

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belly full of beef, and the Americans gave him the laugh. With his enormous bib-overalls he looked more like a big boy than a man to give commands. But he rolled his eyes knowingly and led off up a wash and they lay back and watched the lookout.

He stood out boldly, like a mountain sheep on a crag, making signals to the bandits behind. Then suddenly he dropped his gun and fell off the cliff, and a rifle-shot echoed from the heights. Another came close upon it and the second bandit fell. The Americans gave a cheer and charged.

THAT was one thing no Mexican could stand up to—the good shooting of Winchester and his scouts. They stampeded to a man when their lookouts went down and the Americans galloped through the pass.

Their blood was up, now—they were full-fed and out for revenge—and when Irons and McCann came scrambling down they took after the bandits on the run. But at Rocky Ford the Mexicans made a stand, taking shelter behind the bank, and the chase was brought to a halt.

Through all their long ride from Double Adobes, not an American had been injured or killed, and Irons would not take a chance now. He had swung around behind a hill and begun shooting down at the bandits when there came a volley from across the ford. The Mexicans rose up running, turned back to get their horses, changed their minds and took to the brush. And all the time, from their hill-top, Win's men were smoking them up.

Who these other men were who had attacked the bandits from the rear they could not even guess, but as the firing ceased and they galloped down to look, Captain Ross appeared at the ford. He beckoned imperiously and stepped back into the willows and Irons took the hint and crossed. The Captain, to save him, had fired across into Mexico—but he did not wish it known. Officially, he was somewhere else.

CHAPTER XV

A Figure in White

THERE was a figure in white on the roof of Escondido as the Rangers came in sight of Smugglers Crossing, and Irons glanced up at Ross.

"There's Anitra," he said. "Still watching from her tower. Has there been any trouble—while I was gone?"

"The Rangers took care of all that," evaded the Captain. "Yes—Fausto Parral was here."

"That devil's son!" cursed Win. "And I let him get away, again! Can't we catch the scoundrel—any way?"

"W'y, yes," answered Ross. "I believe we can."

"Well, why don't we do it?" demanded Winchester. "Before he comes over and scares her!"

"We'll talk about that, later," suggested the Captain. "You're lucky to get back alive."

"Oh, I don't know," retorted Irons. "Maybe *he's* the lucky guy. If you hadn't flagged me at Rocky Ford—"

"You'd've gone after him and maybe got killed. That's all he was fishing for—to lead you into an ambush. But look! I believe she's seen you!"

Anitra had left her tower and was dancing along the roof, waving her veil, jumping up and down for joy.

"Yes, sir!" exclaimed Win. "She knows me, by the gods. And I haven't had a shave for two weeks!"

"Well, what does *she* care?" returned Ross. "She hasn't known whether you were alive or dead."

"I'm *going!*" declared Irons, putting spurs to his horse; and the Captain gazed after him glumly.

"All he thinks about is fighting," he complained. "And him with a girl like that! I declare, if I was twenty years younger—"

"But you ain't," cut in Buster McCann; and the Captain regarded him severely.

"Never mind," he said. "I wasn't talking to you—why don't you buy yourself a shirt?"

"Because," came back Buster, "I don't have time—keeping up with a man

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like that. I'll bet you a dollar he'll be starting off tonight, trying to ketch up with Fausto Parral. It's jest ride, ride, till his horse gives out. And then, some morning, Fausto will look in on him, smiling, and tell him how much he loves his gal."

He squinched his eyes up to laugh, and then thought better of it.

"He's jest naturally too smart for us," he ended.

"Mebbe so," grumbled Ross and went into a forbidding silence, at which Buster reined away and joined the gang. Win had reached the far white gate and was running up the stairway, and every man of them heaved a sigh.

"Oh—*Win!*" she cried, "I thought you were dead!" And she rushed into his arms and wept.

"Not me!" he declared, as she kissed him. "But Anitra! why, what's the matter? You look so pale!"

"Oh—nothing!" she smiled back. "But will you promise me something, Win? Never to go across that river again!"

"Sure!" he responded. "As soon as I get my man! And then we'll quit the country. Go to El Paso and get married! How's that?"

"All right," she sighed. "Only somehow I'm afraid. Can't we go now—without that? He's such a cruel man—and while you were away—"

"Did he send you crazy letters?" he demanded.

"OH, horrible! And all the time I thought he had you. I didn't see you when you left with the rest—and he said he was going to hang you! Unless I came over and kissed his hand—"

"He said that?" raged Winchester, wildly.

"Yes—and worse," she shuddered, laying her cheek against his. "I—I nearly went," she confessed.

"My—God!" he muttered. "Can't I ever ketch that man? The Mexicans are right—he's a devil. He's sold his soul, and no bullet will kill him. But Anitra, I'm going to try. I'll never be happy, wherever we are, as long as that brute is alive. He'll follow us anywhere—but here you're safe with me—and the boys and the Rangers will protect you."

"Oh, I want to *go!*" she wailed. "You don't know how I've suffered. And to see those dead bodies, swinging around on the poles!"

"I'll go over and cut them down!" he promised.

"What? And get caught again? I saw him this morning, going by with all his men! No, no! You must stay right here. Don't you love me? Is it asking too much?"

"Why—no," he answered, looking away. "Are you sure it was Fausto and his men?"

"Am I sure!" she flared up. "Look at that!" And she snatched up a torn note from the floor. "Look at that!" she repeated, piecing the fragments together. "That's the kind of letters he writes! And I—I have to read them or he'd punish the messengers! Little children—scared out of their wits!"

She paused, for he was no longer listening. His eyes were fixed on the note. He was reading the words aloud, the better to understand them; and when he finished he was as white as she was.

"I'll be back," he said, snatching up his hat; and went bounding down the stairs.

CHAPTER XVI

"Fighting Men!"

"CAPTAIN," said Winchester, as he rode down to the chuck-wagon, where the Rangers and cowboys were camped, "come over here. I want to talk to you."

Ross rose up gravely and led the way to the Roofless Adobe.

"Did she tell you?" he asked. "I thought so. It was all I could do to keep her from going across. She thought you were his prisoner, all the time."

"But those letters!" protested Irons, hoarsely. "Are we going to let that rascal live? He went by here this morning with all his men and there isn't a soldier at the ford. They're fighting it out, up at Presidio, and there isn't any government, you might say. Let's go down and clean up Fronteras. *You* don't need to cross the Line—just catch 'em when they come across."

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"And you?" inquired Ross.

"I'll ride down after dark and jump 'em out at dawn. And you know Fausto—he'll make a break for the river. Can I trust the Rangers to get him?"

"You can trust me, personally," replied the Captain; and Winchester clasped his hand. He was shaving his tawny beard before returning to Anitra when Buffington Hall came down the river trail. There was a posse of men behind him and when he saw their camp he rode past the house without stopping.

"By the gods, boys!" he exclaimed. "I cain't hardly believe it, seeing you all back safe and sound. When I found you'd been taken prisoners I rode straight to Presidio and kept them wires hot. What's our Government for if it can't protect its citizens—and especially from bandits like that! I demanded troops and, by grab, I got'em! That's why them Mexicans turned you loose—they seen cavalry, across the river!"

He jumped down and shook hands all around and introduced the men of his posse.

"These gentlemen," he explained, "have come down to he'p me out. I'm going to burn Fronteras to the ground."

"Good!" pronounced Irons, with a quick look at Ross, whose stern face never changed.

"I'll have to warn you, Mr. Hall," he said, "not to cross the Mexican Line. But anything I can do from this side—"

"We'll call on you," ended Hall. Then he glanced at Winchester and jerked his head towards the brush.

"How about *you?*" he inquired.

"I'm going," he answered. "But don't tell Anitra. I kinder promised not to cross the Line."

"*You* did!" barked Hall. "Well, what do I *pay* you for? And all the rest of your gang? And how do you explain giving up your guns to Fausto Parral and them soldiers? At five dollars a day I expect my men to *fight!*"

"Well, I'll fight—keep your shirt on," responded Irons. "But after we take the town, I quit."

"You can quit now, if you want to!" cursed Buff. "I've got me a new bunch of gunmen. Men that will charge hell with a bucket of water. Fighting men! Afraid of nothing!"

"Well, I'll quit then," agreed Win. "And go in with the Rangers. Captain Ross just told me he'd keep my place open, so—"

"Oh, no, no!" burst out Buffington, hastily. "I said a little more than I meant, mebby. But by the gods, I don't see why you surrendered to them Mexicans without even firing a shot!"

"That's all right, I don't have to explain to you now. I've quit and you can go to hell. So you think, when you pay a man five dollars, you've hired him to go and get killed?"

"Well—no!" answered Hall. "But I've got a bunch now—"

IRONS glanced at the posse and grunted, and Buff was on the defensive.

"Anyhow," he said, "they're the best I could get. What's Captain Ross laughing about?"

"I ought to tell you," explained Ross, coming over, "Win and I had it all fixed up. He was going to jump the town with ten men at dawn and I was going to work from this side."

"Ten men!" repeated Buff, beginning to blink. "Well, I'll have to take back what I said, then. But I still cain't understand—"

"Take it easy," advised Winchester. "Or get a new haid. I guess I had a reason or I'd've drawn my gun and got shot to doll-rags."

"Yes," nodded the Captain. "He's told me how it happened and I'm telling you he did just right. A Ranger—and he's still one of my boys—is supposed to think of his men."

"Well—er—what *were* your plans?" inquired Buffington, lamely. "You were going to attack at dawn?"

"That was the idee," admitted Win. "But I'm going up to see Anitra first. And I might as well say, while I'm on the subject, that I consider you a hell of a father. How long would that one-legged Indian last if Parral actually came across? If he's smart enough to capture twenty-seven fighting Texans without even firing a shot—"

"Gawd—A'mighty!" gasped Hall. "I never thought of that."

"No," responded Irons. "And my advice to you is to leave this posse be-

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hind. Tell 'em to camp right there and protect your daughter. I'll take care of Fronteras, myself."

"Then you'll go?" exclaimed Buffington, eagerly. "I'll do it. I'll do jest that!"

"Only remember," said Win. "I've done quit my job. Give your orders to somebody else."

CHAPTER XVII

The Vipers' Den

BUFFINGTON HALL and his seventeen cowboys surrounded Fronteras at dawn, but Winchester Irons' men charged. They had suffered enough from Fausto and his bandits and they shot at every man that showed. Women and children ran everywhere, even under their horses' feet, but they never reined aside. No one else counted in that bandits' den but Fausto Parral, himself. They were trying to jump him out—rush him into the Rio Grande—and the Rangers would do the rest.

The ragged old town was sprawled along a hill with the barracks at the top and, as they dashed past, a soldier appeared. Then another—fifteen or twenty—and still they circled the plaza, seeking Fausto in the fleeing crowd. The inhabitants of Fronteras had been up late the night before, and a good half of them were right out of bed. They wore anything or nothing as they headed for the river and, once on its edge, they jumped. But Fausto's bald dome was not among the swimmers and Winchester's scouts swung back.

Not a shot had been fired at them as they tore through the town—the robbers were too anxious to escape. That was part of their tradition—never to fight when they were trapped—but Rausto had not shown up with the rest. Always he could be depended upon to do the unexpected thing. He had hid, then, in some house along the square. Win had just stepped off his horse to begin a rapid search when the soldiers at the cuartel opened fire.

It was a ragged volley of shots, from the flat roof of the old barracks, and not a man in Win's company was hurt; but two horses went down in the shower of bullets and every scout took cover. Then, from the flagstaff, a strange flag went up and the shooting of the Americans ceased. It was red, white and green, the Constitutional banner, first flung to the wind by Madero. The flag of the Mexican Government, long displaced by the skull and cross-bones adopted by the Troops of Death.

On the hills around Fronteras, from which Hall's cowboys were shooting up the town, there was a sudden and ominous silence. Had Villa lost his hold on this outlaw country? Had Fronteras been occupied from the South? Irons dashed up on a roof, his heart in his mouth for fear they had attacked a Federal garrison; but as he stared at the shooting soldiers he spied a man he knew —the slim, sinister figure of Lieutenant Cota.

These were the men from Fronteras who, in order to get revenge, had joined the Villa army and then mutinied. The rascals who had hounded him from Double Adobes to Presidio del Norte, trying to make him run and get shot. He drew a bead on Cota and knocked him off the wall.

"Shoot! Shoot!" he yelled at his scouts. "These are the soldiers who took us prisoners at Double Adobes! Go after them! Kill every man!"

THE gunmen opened up with a blast that stampeded their enemies the first shot. Then, charging in blindly, they stormed the old fort while the deserters scampered away like rats. That red, white and green banner was but one of a pile of flags which Fausto had kept for the purpose—never to be caught without the flag of any enemy that came. They slaughtered them ruthlessly, without fear or mercy, and ran down to search the houses again; but Parral could not be found. Weeping women and children were routed out of dark hovels and sent fleeing from the town — the same women who had used their siren wiles to bring the hated Gringoes to their death. Hall's cowboys charged in behind and set fire to every thatch until Fronteras was a mass of flame

Roofs fell under the weight of plastered mud, hidden powder and bombs exploded. The last fugitives dashed out from their secret hiding-places — but

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none of them was Parral. He had been there—or so they thought—and he had not escaped for they had held up every man who fled. The old grey-beards they spared, though their lives had been evil; and they young boys, incapable of doing harm. Only the first rush of bandits had escaped into the river, and the Rangers would attend to them.

"That's all!" announced Buff Hall, striding about like an avenging angel, a flaming torch still in his hand; and when he met Win Irons he smiled. Paternally, like a father who forgives much in a wilful and headstrong son.

"That's all, boy," he said. "And it sure does me good to see this vipers' den wiped out. And not an American killed! You was right, kid, and I was wrong. Now let's get across the Line, while we're lucky."

"Yes, sir," nodded Winchester. "And if we got Fausto Parral I'll never cross that river again."

He hit the Rio Grande, his horse swimming, and splashed up on the other side.

"Well?" he demanded of Ross; and the Captain knew what he meant.

"I don't believe," he observed, "he'll trouble you any more." And, from him, that was answer enough.

CHAPTER XVIII

Another Promise

A PALL of smoke still hung over Fronteras when Winchester rode up to Escondido, where Anitra looked down from her tower. Someone had cut down the bodies of the "traitors," swinging wraithlike from the telegraph poles, and there was not a soldier in sight. To Irons all was well—it was a heavenly view—but Anitra did not wave. Her eyes were red with crying and she did not run down to meet him.

"You promised me," she said, "never, never to go back. And then, the same day, you crossed."

His eyes were red, too, from the dust of battle and the smoke of smouldering Fronteras, and his nature seemed to have changed.

"Did I say that?" he asked, and laughed. "Well, your Old Man came home and made me out a coward, and now *you* make me out a liar. But we cleaned out Fronteras and burned it to the ground—I'll be back." And he started down the stairs.

"No—now Win!" she cried, rushing after him. "Can't you see I'm all upset? Please come back and tell me about it."

"Pretty soon!" he answered; and was gone.

She was still pacing the roof when the Rangers came back—and her father and all his men—and she waved her hand pleadingly at Captain Ross. His eyes were not so red, but he ragarded her gravely as she stood waiting, with tears in her eyes.

"Well," he said, "how's my Little Sweetheart? And what's the matter, now?"

"Oh, he went off and left me, the first word I said. Is that the way he is, all the time?"

"Oh, no," he answered. "Just when he's fighting. He's some quick—I'll have to admit it."

"But he promised me, only yesterday, never to cross that river again. And then he went down and *crossed*."

"Well, that's him," admitted Ross. "He won't stop for nobody, once he gets an idea into his head. You'd better quit him, Sweetheart, and give me that kiss you promised. You know—when I got Parral."

"O-oh! Did you get him?" she cried, leaping up; but she did not give him the kiss. "I couldn't understand," she said at last, "why he had that strange look in his eyes."

"Who—Win?" he asked, and smiled gravely. "He's a wonderful Ranger," he said. "One man in ten thousand when it comes to fighting and never getting anybody hurt. He took ten men at dawn and charged through Fronteras, running them Mexicans ahead of him like rabbits. The Rangers didn't cross, but we were waiting along the river; and when they hit the water—well, we killed them. One-eyed Fausto was foxy—he sunk under the surface the moment he heard the first gun. But I'd spotted him by his eye—and that bald head of his—and I waited for his to come up."

"And did he?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"Well—yes," he said. "So you can

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give me that kiss. I don't reckon he'll bother you any more."

SHE kissed him, perfunctorily, and stood thinking for a while.

"I can hardly believe it," she murmured. "Did you actually see him die?"

"I didn't need to see him!" he stated, rising up. "When I shoot a man like that—"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she cried. "I know! I understand! You're such a wonderful shot! But what became of the body?"

"It sank," he said. "And that was the last of him. But if the bullet didn't kill him there's something else that would. That canyon he floated into—no man could pass through it alive."

"So he's gone," she sighed, straightening up. "But somehow I can hardly believe it. I always thought, if I heard he was dead—oh, everything would be *wonderful!*"

"And it isn't, eh?" he said. "At all!"

"Not a bit," she admitted. "But perhaps—would you mind telling Win I'd like to see him?"

"Not at all," he answered grimly. But Win did not come—at all. She could see him through her glasses as he moved about the camp—so quick—there was no one like him. But hot-headed—he seemed to be leaving. She sighed, and turned away. Her eyes closed and she was dreaming, perhaps of him, when swift steps came running up the stairs.

He reached out his hands—she leapt into his arms, and held up her lips to be kissed.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, as he held her close.

"*I'm* sorry," he answered; and they sighed.

"I'll never cross that river again," he promised. And she smiled as she gazed into his eyes.

CHAPTER XIX

"It Grows On the Bushes"

A GREAT peace had settled over Smugglers' Crossing, where before had been nothing but war. War as the Mexicans knew it, with one revolution after the other and "traitors" hung on telegraph poles; Troops of Death, marching in and out, skulls and cross-bones on their flags and hate for the Americans in their hearts. For months, while Buffington Hall rushed his cattle out of Chihuahua and the bandits of Fronteras fought him back, there had been treasons, strategems and spoils, ambuscades and sudden death. But through it all Don Rifle had passed unscathed, and now he had promised never to go back.

It was all very well for soldiers of fortune, Texas Rangers and the rest, but they had no girl to think of. With Winchester Irons it was different, and Anitra had made him promise never, never to cross the Rio Grande. He had been over and had come back again alive—and Fausto Parral was dead. Shot in the river by Captain Ross of the Rangers while the Americans burned Fronteras to the ground. They had wiped out the ancient stronghold of their enemies and killed Parral, the bandit chief. That was why, all at once, there was peace.

"Isn't it wonderful!" exclaimed Anitra, looking down from the tower of her father's house as she held her lover's hand. Escondido, the Hidden, stood on the bench above Smugglers' Crossing, a huge, white-walled fort, once the *hacienda* of a Spanish Grant, now headquarters for Buffington Hall of the Hog-Eye Cattle Company. But to Anitra it was still a prison, though now she was free to go. But she had been shut in so long she felt no desire to leave, now that Win was by her side.

"It sure is!" he agreed, smiling back into her eyes; and as his boyish dimples suddenly showed she nestled closer and sighed.

"Too wonderful to last," she said.

"Well, maybe so," he agreed. "There's always some cloud in the sky."

"What do you mean?" she asked, straightening up as she caught a change in his voice; and he nodded towards the south.

"See that dust?" he said. "I've been watching it for an hour. Away down there in the pass, where the road comes up from Chihuahua."

"You see everything," she sighed at last. "What do you think it is?"

"A big herd of cattle," he ventured.

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"Either that or another army."

"Army!" she repeated. "Why, what would they be coming up here for?"

"Well," he said. "Maybe they've heard what we did to Fronteras. But I think it's just a trail herd."

She gazed a long time at the thin streamer of dust, barely showing against the sky, and went back to the army again.

"I wonder if we ought to tell father?" she asked.

"No, he'll hear about it, soon enough," he answered, "and go from one fit into a thousand. Probably ask me to stay and help him out of *this* jack-pot. That's why I say—let's go!"

"What? And let him face that whole army, alone?"

"Well, yes—if it is an army. But what difference does it make to us what happens in Mexico? I promised you I'd never go back."

"Yes, but Father will need your advice!"

"SURE!" he agreed. "But will he take it—that's the question. Did he *ever* take any advice? Of course, if you want to stay here, and will give me back my promise—"

"No! Now Win, that's settled!"

"All right," he shrugged. "I can fight or leave it alone. But I might as well have one hand tied behind me as to—"

"You must never cross that river again, no matter what happens to Father. But I do think we ought to stay until this army gets in."

"Well, we'll stay, then," he promised, amiably. "I've got ten good gunmen, right down there in camp, that'd take on the whole outfit, lone-handed. And with all these cowboys the Old Man has hired—"

"No—no fighting!" she warned. "You stay right here with me—"

"That's easy," he laughed. "For ever and ever. But there's something about this place—it breeds trouble. No sooner do we get our cattle out of Mexico than here comes another, bigger herd; and no sooner do we whip Parral and burn his Robbers' Roost than here's another army to whip. I don't mind it for myself, but it's no place for a woman to live. The only one in the country—with all these fighting men."

"Oh, they're not so bad," she protested. "I'm sure they'd do anything for me. It was only Pausto Parral I was afraid of—and he's dead. Captain Ross shot him."

"So he says," nodded Irons. "Look who's coming in from the hills."

He jerked his head towards the jagged mountains that shut them in from the north, and Anitra heaved a sigh. Her blue eyes clouded, she pushed back her corn-colored hair and turned away in despair.

"It's Father. They've had trouble," she said.

"It grows on the bushes," he observed and waited grimly as Buff Hall rode up. He was a large, red-faced man, standing high in his stirrups as he peered up into the tower.

"What do you think?" he shouted up to Winchester. "All them Hawg Eye cattle are gone! The damned rustlers have run 'em off as fast as I put 'em across. I'd've done better to leave 'em in Mexico."

"Nope," responded Win, and jerked his thumb towards the south.

Buff looked—looked again—and cursed.

CHAPTER XX

Another Army Coming

"DAD-BLAST it!" wailed Hall. "Another army coming! I knowed we'd ketch hell when you shot them men in uniform—pulled down the Mexican flag at Fronteras. Them *ladrones* that escaped has complained to Pancho Villa and he's coming on the run to kill us!"

He turned as his men trotted up and yelled at an agile young cowboy:

"You Jimmy, go and ketch a fresh hawse and git ready to ride to Presidio. They's a Troop of Death coming, to wipe us off the map. Tell that Colonel we want a troop of cavalry. I'll write you a letter—now git!"

He ran upstairs to look through the glasses, then slammed them down in a pet.

"Skull and cross-bones!" he exploded.

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"More Pancho Villa bandits! But what are they doing with those cattle?"

"Some they stole," suggested Irons. "Bringing them up to sell."

"Yes! And then they'll turn around and steal mine! But they'll never git 'em across. I'm going to notify the customs inspectors, the brand inspectors and everybody else. I guess I've got some rights!"

"Maybe so," shrugged Winchester, and leaned back in his easy chair.

"Well, you don't seem to give a damn!" scolded Hall. "What am I going to do about Pony Deal and his rustlers, running off all my Mexican cows?"

"Go in and steal 'em back! This country is being run on a six-shooter basis. How do you know it was Pony Deal?"

"Because I seen him and Bandy Storms and about forty rustlers up at the mouth of Cherry Creek, working like hell on a barbed-wire fence—and they put up a notice and left.

"'CUT THIS FENCE AND BUY YOUR COFFIN,' it said. Now! What can I do about that?"

"Put up another fence this side and hire some gunmen to watch it. Then grab the cattle when they drive them in to the railroad and prove the brands are burned over yours."

"Are you game to do that?" demanded Buffington, eagerly. "He'll fight! I know Pony Deal!"

"Well," began Winchester, and glanced over at Anitra. "We were thinking of getting married."

"Married!" yelled Hall. "And move up to El Paso? Leave me to fight it out alone? Here I've got enough trouble to pack hell a mile—"

"It's going to be worse," predicted Irons. "What's one man, more or less?"

"Well, you've got *ten more men*, camped down in the brush, that took Fronteras, lone-handed. You take them gun-fighters and cut that fence and I'll pay you—five dollars a day."

"Nope," shrugged Win. "Some of the boys would get killed. And another thing, Mr. Hall, you done called me a coward because I surrendered to those Villa soldiers at Double Adobes—"

"I was jest excited!" pleaded Buff.

"And you said, when you paid a man five dollars a day, you expected him to *fight*."

"Well—well, isn't that reasonable?"

"It is if you can get them to do it. But these boys are my friends—they'll follow me anywhere—"

"I'll pay you ten!" broke in Hall. "How's that?"

"No!" answered Win. "They can go if they want to. I've got through taking orders from you."

"*We-ell!*" shrilled Buff. "And making love to my daughter! Don't you know, young man, she isn't of age? How about the consent of her father?"

"He can go to hell," said Irons, "as far as I am concerned. Are you trying to trade her off like an Apache squaw? I'm not that kind of a man!"

HE rose up, his eyes gleaming, and Anitra stood beside him.

"No!" she said. "And I'm not that kind of a woman. I love Win and I'm going to marry him."

"Now, Anitra!" reproached Hall. "Haven't I done everything for you? Haven't I sent you off to school, and all that? But now, when I need you most—with Poney Deal stealing my cattle by the thousand and this army of Mexicans marching in—"

"Well, I'll stay!" she announced, tempestuously. "But you've got to treat my sweetheart right!"

She reached out and took Win's hand and the old man saw plainly he was whipped.

"I will! I will!" he promised. "I jest get excited—that's all. But unless I have Winchester to he'p I don't see how I'm going to git along."

"You'll have him," responded Irons, "as long as you treat him right and don't go bossing him around. I've been top sergeant in the Rangers too long to take any orders from you."

"Well, so you have," he admitted. "Now what about Pony Deal?"

"Leave him alone," advised Win. "until this trail herd gets past. And Villa's army—don't forget that so easily!"

"And don't forget," added Anitra, "what Win has promised. He's never to cross that river again!"

"Well, jest as you say," grumbled Buffington Hall; and went out with his eyes cast down.

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CHAPTER XXI

Out For Blood

THE great trail-herd advanced slowly—it seemed barely to move as it crept up towards the Rio Grande; but the cavalry that marched with it swept swiftly ahead until suddenly it swung off to the east. To San Miguel, where the fugitives from Fronteras had taken refuge, then on to Fronteras itself. At Smugglers' Crossing the Americans tood guard all night, ready to fight if they tried to cross, but the cattle reached the river first. Big-boned, Mexican stuff, all horns and backbone—clay-banks, red and white, roans—and, mixed in among them, white-faced Herefords that belong to Buffington Hall.

He paced up and down in front of Roofless Adobe—which once had had a roof before the Mexicans burned it down—and cursed as he watched them drink. What chance would he have of getting his cows back when this trail-herd crossed, if it crossed? And what chance would Americans have when the red-flag soldiers got in? The Mexicans watered their herds, one after the other, and drove them out to graze—and then, down the river from Presidio, came the hard-riding American cavalry.

Buff Hall gave them everything—level ground for their camp, a fenced pasture for their mounts, a pile of wood for the kitchen—and in an hour a camp had sprung up. Even rows of tents, picket-lines for the horses, mountains of baled-hay, rushed in by trucks. When the Villistas arrived, flying their red flag-of-death, Hall stood at the crossing and laughed.

There were four or five hundred in this Tropa de Muerte, enough to put up a fight if they had come straight to Double Adobes. A rag-tag band of Chihuahua *vaqueros,* still riding their master's horses but out for a belated revenge. Don Luis Terrazas, war governor of Chihuahua and owner of half the state, had beat them to the line with his wagon-train of treasure; but he had had to leave his cattle behind. A million—half a million—nobody could count them. And now they were coming out.

There was more dust in the far pass—and in Chihuahua City Pancho Villa had confiscated everything. He had moved into the Governor's palace, taking Terrazas eldest son prisoner, stabling his horses in the ornate bed-chambers; but the money in the bank vaults was gone. Tons and tons of *pesos,* Spanish gold and French gold, American eagles and double-eagles—but Don Luis *hijo,* the son, had allowed himself to be caught. Now Villa had seized their cattle, started them for the border, and delivered his ultimatum.

These cattle belonged to Terrazas, yes. He could claim them when they crossed the Rio Grande, but Villa was going to sell them. And the first time the Governor protested a sale his son would die. Not easily, before a firing-squad; but hung, a little at a time. The Old Man had weakened and promised to give his bill of sale; a great commission house had offered to handle the cattle; but here they were held up at Double Adobes for lack of a man who dared to buy them.

Winchester Irons rode down to the ford, and the Mexicans held up their right hands. It was the peace-sign, and one of them rode out to the middle of the river; but for once Don Rifle held back. He had received the name of Mr. Rifle from Villa himself—and a letter saying Win was his friend—but there was something about this Colonel Delgado who beckoned him over which gave the ex-Ranger pause. He was a big, burly brute, with buck teeth always skinned as if to bite—and he smiled too much for a man with teeth like that. But Irons had promised Anitra not to cross, not even half-way, so he shook his finger in the sign for No and rode back to Escondido, where he was safe.

ANITRA kissed him and made much of his devotion, but as he started for camp that night she looked after him anxiously. When he changed his mind he was quick to act. Too quick for reason, too quick to turn gack—and he had had the trail-herd on his mind. The quicker they got it across and the Mexicans out of the country the better for them all; for there were all the makings of a first-class war, right there at Smugglers' Crossing.

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Don Rifle was thinking it over when a hoarse voice hailed him from the brush.

"Hello, Win," it said; and laughed.

"Hello, Buster," he answered; and a big man, dressed principally in a pair of bib-overalls, stepped out and beckoned him off the trail. It was Buster McCann, just back from one of the mysterious errands that took him so often across the Line, and Win followed him to where they could talk.

"I seen you—down looking at that crossing," said Buster, "so I come across to give you a tip. Them soldiers are just waiting to git you out into the river and then *bingo!* Fronteras is avenged."

"Sounds reasonable," admitted Irons. "What's doing on the other side?"

"They're a bunch of Reds!" confided McCann—"out for blood. And they'll kill any man that crosses. So pass the word along to Captain Ross and—here's a hawse I brought ye."

He stepped behind a tree and fetched out a buckskin pony with a long, bristling moustache, from much feeding among the rocks.

"Little present," he said. "For saving my life, that time. He's a Coahuila desert hawse and gentle as a dawg. Thought you might like to give him to—well, to her!"

He stepped behind the tree again, leaving the rope in Winchester's hand; and for some reason he never came back.

CHAPTER XXII

A Man With Nerve

ALL the cattle in Mexico seemed converging on Smugglers' Crossing—and all the bad, man-killing Mexicans. They were so bad that no one would cross the river to trade with them—no, not for a million dollars. At ten dollars a head there was a fortune in Terrazas cows, and the first man to close the deal would get them all, but Captain Ross had clossed the crossing to all Americans. So, for lack of somebody else to kill, the Reds went to work on each other.

In the open swale below Double Adobes, jealous rivals fought it out with the knife—for the women of Fronteras had slipped into camp, to stir up all the trouble they could. They had hoped to see Don Rifle hung on a telegraph pole, but he had been warned in time. He kept out of sight, and another man took the chance. Smoky McMasters, the bravest of the brave—he crossed the river alone.

On the morning of the fourth day Smoky rode in with two mule-loads of gold—a dark man with a grim smile and black eyes that never wavered, ready to lose or win everything at one throw. An American banker had put up the money to buy the Terrazas cattle and Smoky had staked his life. It was a fifty-fifty proposition—no hard feeling either way—and the man that closed the deal with Pancho Villa would have a monopoly on the cattle.

Like Buster McCann, Smoky had learned to talk *pelado* — he had lived with the border Mexicans and liked them. He had friends among the rabble of drunken, fighting peons who swarmed on the other side. But he waited—he believed in luck. The break came when a Mexican that he knew stepped out with a knife in his hand. He wrapped his serape around his left arm for a foil and advanced to strike at his man. Then the crowd closed in and Smoky started across, while every eye was on the fight.

From the American side they saw him push through the spectators, dressed so nearly like the Mexicans in his blanket and combrero that nobody knew him for an American. But when in a burst of shouting—and loud *dianas* from the buglers—the fight came to a sudden end, they all turned on him at once. He went down, and he came up again, held on high by the giant Colonel Delgado, who had snatched him away from the rest. Here was the victim they had sought for so long—he headed for the telegraph pole.

"Death to the Gringo!" yelled the rabble; and then the victor in the knife-fight appeared. He had lost his grand moment—when he had bent over his dying enemy and washed his hands in his blood—but at the sight of McMasters with the rope around his neck he rushed in and flung it off.

"No, *hombres!*" he shouted, hugging Smoky with one brawny arm while he waved his bloody dirk in the air. "He is my friend, my *compadre!* He shall never

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be hung! Not him—you shall kill me first!"

He struck a tragic pose and their hero-worship returned. They followed him, with a chorus of vivas, while he led McMasters to the chief.

HE came back across the river, a little shaky but with the fire of a great victory in his eye, and heaved the heavy packs on his mules.

"Well, boys, I win," he announced; and rode out into the middle of the stream. The buck-toothed Colonel came to meet him, attended by two soldiers with empty saddle-bags. A pair of steers was pushed past, according to the Mexican way of counting, and Smoky handed over two eagles. No tally-sheet, no counting—a ten-dollar gold-piece for each cow-brute, and they kept up the trading until dark. Smoky's cowboys held the cattle on the American side, but he had no time for night-herding and the rest. He left everything—to drink deep with his *compadre*, Manuel, and to shake hands with all his friends.

The great hold-up of Villa cattle was broken and John McMasters was an uncrowned king. All the cattle-buyers loaned him money to put more across for them, and gold poured into his hands in a stream. Let others handle the herds and start them toward the railroad—that was too slow for the redoubtable Don Juanito. Every man was his friend—they admired him for his courage—and as the money rolled in he turned it over and bought more cattle, to spend up the trail after the rest.

But in the full stride of his success Fate struck him a stunning blow—Fate and the rustlers who had swarmed down from the hills to get theirs while the getting was good. One of his cowboys rode in at dawn with the news that his herd had been stampeded. Men had been seen in the moonlight, riding down on them swinging blankets, and the cattle had run—towards the mountains.

Winchester Irons and The Ten were in their camp among the mesquites when they heard Smoky's first roaring curses.

"W'y, the pot-licking haounds! The bastards!" he raged. "Rustlers, hey? Robbing a pore man like me after I've put them cattle across! Who'll go he'p me git my cows back?"

"I will!" answered Win and, with his gun-fighters behind him, he joined in the rush up the trail. Everybody joined, but it was twenty miles to the Rim and most of the others fell behind. Then, out on the wide prairie that stretched north to the railroad, it was ten miles further to the place. But Irons and The Ten knew the ways of rustlers and they turned west and rode for the hills. Let others work the range for what cattle were left — the big bunch would be rounded up and headed for some canyon that led into the outlaws' stronghold.

They rode hard, but not too hard, changing their gait from a trot to a lope—even dropping down to a walk—but their ponies threw the miles behind. Then they sighted the cloud of dust where the cattle plodded along and Win took another turn towards the hills. He had ridden this country as a Ranger and he knew the very canyon they were heading for—Shook Canyon, that led down into Maverick Basin, the hideout of Pony Deal.

PONY was king of the rustlers and a hard man to stop, but they cut the herd off anyway, and Pony's men took to the hills. They knew The Ten by the horses they rode, and Irons by his big, blue roan—a rough bunch to monkey with; over half of them ex-Rangers—and every man out for war. There were more cattle coming — thousands and thousands of Terrazas steers—and these they had were dead on their feet. They rode off and left them without firing a shot, and when McMasters loped in he was amazed.

"Wall!" he exclaimed. "Mistuh Irons and gentlemen, I certainly thank you kindly. Anything I can do, don't hesitate to mention it. How about a thousand dollars?"

"Nope! Nope!" laughed Winchester. "Speaking for myself, you're very welcome, pardner. We don't figure on seeing a good man robbed."

"No indeed, sir!" chimed in The Ten, crowding up to shake hands; and they started the herd towards the railroad.

"Well, how about taking them into Ganado?" suggested McMasters. "And

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this is a business proposition. You boys guard them across the prairie for me and a thousand dollars is nothing. I can see by the way them rustlers stampeded 'em that this is jest a starter."

"You're right about that," agreed Irons. "And they may come after them yet. How about it, Boys? Shall we take 'em?"

"Sure!" responded The Ten; and Smoky shook hands again.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Lost Lady

THE Ten were returning from the cow-town of Ganado, well satisfied with their new job. But what were ten men when every cow-thief in Texas was hurrying to get in on the steal? Smoky was shoving them across by the thousand—cattle bought for ten dollars a head—and even a rustler could double his money and pay the price, to boot. But that was not the rustler's idea. Smoky's second herd had been stampeded below the Rim and every cow had been lost.

They heard the news just outside of Smugglers' Crossing and Irons swung off to the west. It was a rough, broken country called The Rolls by local cowmen—a thousand rolling ridges leading down toward the river, with low buttes, like pin-cushions, between. Their level tops were a mass of cactus and *lechuguilla*, and along both sides of the sandy wash they travelled there was fringe of spines and thorns. An ideal place for a stranger to get lost—but who would be looking for a woman?

The Ten reined in as Irons raised his hand and, up from Escondido, they watched her coming—a slender, graceful figure with head bent. Win started to go towards her but something held him back. Her face was heavily veiled and she was crying—she rode past without even seeing them. Then it came to him—she looked like Anitra.

Winchester glanced at his men and shook his head. A woman—a white woman—was a rarity in that country, and this one was riding a good horse. A blooded horse of the old *palomilla* breed, with a coat like dusty gold. Never since he had been at Smugglers' Crossing had Win seen such an animal, and its rider was expensively dressed. Here was no roving adventuress, lured in by the soldiers—she had the look and the ways of a lady. He waited until she passed out of sight around the point and back-tracked her to within sight of Escondido. Then he waved The Ten on and followed the trail alone until he saw the Delaware woman, watching him. The huge moccasined squaw who ran the Hall household, her husband, and everything else.

"What you doin'?" she demanded as he reined in at the gate; and Anitra looked down from her tower.

"Why—Win!" she exclaimed. "Why, where did you come from? I saw your men going by and thought something had happened to you. Come up, dear; I want to tell you something."

He cast a sidewise glance at the glowering Mary and another at her one-legged husband, who guarded the Escondido gate. Then he handed old Henry his reins and mounted the stairs to Anitra's retreat. Here was something mysterious—something to be looked into—but he only kissed her and waited.

"Nice day," he observed, looking down towards the crossing, where Smoky McMasters was still passing cattle. "Lots of strangers in town. More tents."

"Yes," she said. "It *is* a town. Some officers are bringing in their wives."

"Lots of company, eh?" he nodded. "Do any of them go out riding?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, looking very subdued; and he fixed her with his keen blue eyes.

"That was a pretty horse she rode," he said; and she moved closer and took his hand.

"That was my mother," she confided. "Didn't you know I had one? You never asked me."

"Yes, I knew," he replied. "The Rangers know everything—or try to. Has she been coming down to see you?"

"WHEN Father's away—she doesn't want to meet him. But now she can't come any more. Mr. Deal has found out, and he objects."

"Yes, it *is* kinder complicated," he shrugged. "And by the way, where is the Old Man?"

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"Oh, he's out with his cowboys, trying to round up his cattle before all the rest are stolen. He's going to drive them north and put them in a pasture the other side of Ganado."

"It's a bad business," he said. "He stands to lose everything. The rustlers are taking the country."

"And with all these Villa cattle coming through!"

"That's the finishing touch," he agreed. "Now Smoky will be broke—they've run off his second herd. A good fellow, too. I feel sorry for him."

"But what about Father? Don't you feel sorry for him?"

"Well, not so much," he admitted. "Your Old Man is all right, but he rubs me the wrong way. And he's tight as the bark on a tree."

"That's what *she* says," she burst out, and the tears began to flow. "She ran away from him for that. She's extravagant, of course — she loves beautiful things—but he denied her everything. Did you notice how beautifully she was dressed?"

"When we're married," he said, "I'm going to buy you clothes like that."

"Then you don't think it's wrong?" she asked, brightening up. "It wasn't that he didn't have the money. He was mean—he wouldn't give her any! And Mother was raised a lady, you know."

"I could see that," he nodded. "And I knew who she was, too. On a horse she looks just like you."

"And did you like her? Are you glad that she comes?"

"Yes," he nodded, "if you are. I aim to make you happy, Anitra. And if anything should ever happen to Pony Deal—"

"She'll be welcome? Is that what you mean? But she loves him. Honest—she loves him!"

"Well," he began, and fell silent. "We won't talk about it," he said at last.

CHAPTER XXIV

Anitra Rebels

CAPTAIN ROSS was waiting at the camp of The Ten when Don Rifle arrived from Escondido, and even Ross' hardy horse was ridden down. The Rangers were all in after days and nights of scouting, and the Captain had something on his mind.

"Win," he said, when they went into conference, "this country is going to hell. I used to think it was tough when Fausto Parral was alive, but these Mexicans are just as smart. And they're bringing across more Hog-Eye cattle in a day than Fausto would steal in a month. Then, just like he did, they'll steal horses to take back—the best blooded animals they can find. There's someone on this side that's helping them. Now who do you think that could be?"

He smiled grimly as his former sergeant made answer.

"Yes sir—it's Pony Deal. That hombre has set out to be the maverick king and he's working hand in glove with these Mexicans. And yet, to all appearance, he's a respectable cattleman. One of our most prominent citizens, in fact."

"He's behind all this stampeding, too," stated Irons. "It seems like he's out to run the whole country, and he's stealing Smoky McMasters blind. And Buff Hall!"

"Yeah, I heard from him," nodded Ross. "Buff demands, by grab, that I drop everything else and protect him from Pony's rustlers. But my first job is to fight off these Mexicans—I don't feel called in on this range war."

"They sure hate each other," observed Win. "Someone told me that Buff's wife ran away with Pony Deal."

"Well, something like that," shrugged the Captain. "She ran away with Jack Barbé of the old JQ outfit and Pony killed him and took her. Also the JQ ranch and several thousand cattle. He's a pleasant-enough appearing fellow but I happen to know Mr. Deal; and in a general way if there's anything he wants he takes it."

"I get you," responded Irons.

"And another thing," went on Ross. "I might as well tell you he won't think much of your guarding them cattle."

"All the same," came back Winchester, "they're going to be guarded. I won't stand to see a good man like Smoky robbed of everything he's got. What would you think of me and The Ten going into the cattle-guarding business?"

"Well—all right," smiled the Cap-

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tain. "Smoky spoke to me about it already, but I told him he'd have to pay. A young man like you, about to be married, ought to have a few thousand laid away. So you charge him, and charge him plenty. These boys they call The Ten are all right, but they ain't worth much without you. So split with them and keep fifty per cent. You can tell them I said that was about right."

"But Captain, they'd all quit!"

"Not if I know 'em. They like you. But if they do, I'll get you ten more. Good fighting men are common, but leaders are scarce. I'll tell the boys that, myself. What's the reason I can hire Rangers for forty dollars a month? Because they like fighting and good leadership."

"That's right," admitted Win. "I worked for that myself. But it isn't going to be child's play. I've ordered some sawed-off shotguns to break up this stampeding, and Pony's rustlers will be good and sore."

"Never mind his rustlers," advised the Captain. "Keep your eyes on him. He don't hire his killing done—he does it himself. And never think he hasn't got the nerve."

HE paused and glanced up the trail, then cut the war-talk short.

"Here comes my Little Sweetheart," he said; and Anitra dashed up on her new horse. The buckskin that Buster McCann had brought back from his mysterious trip into Coahuila. With his silver-mounted saddle and rigging he was one horse in a thousand and he was fighting his head to go.

"Anyone here want to ride with me?" she asked; but the Captain shook his head.

"Very busy," he answered, and rode down to flag Smoky. The Ten smiled knowingly and said nothing.

"Well," observed Win, shoving a biscuit into his pocket and running to catch his mount, "it isn't every day I get a chance like this. And we'll try that moustached horse."

"Bigote, I call him," she said as they rode off. "Wasn't it nice of Buster to give him to me? I wonder where he is, now?"

"Oh, rambling round below the Line. Taking his life in his hands, every day. He can't be happy unless he's talking *pela'o* and mixing with those Mexicans. There's something big going on, and Buster is in on it, but he wanted me to know his heart was right."

"Poor fellow," she murmured, "hasn't he ever married?"

"Too bashful," he answered brazenly. "Let's see how that horse runs!" And he jumped his blue into a lope. Anitra loosened her reins and Bigote dashed by him—they raced, but Bigote won.

"Poor old Blue," smiled Winchester, "he hates to be beat, but it's the end of a long day for him."

"I wish," she ventured, "you were here all the time. We could take a long ride every day. I get so tired, shut up in that house all the time, but Father won't let me go out. He says the rustlers will catch me—they're watching all the time. But I don't believe they *could*. Bigote is too fast for them."

"He's good," admitted Irons. "But they might cut you off. Who's this, now—coming down the wash?"

"It's Father!" she said in a awed voice. "He's been up fighting Pony Deal, I know. When he heard that Mother had been down to see me he almost went out of his head."

"Looks kind of tired," observed Win. "There's a couple of wounded men, behind. You'd better take his advice and stay close for a while—this country is getting bad."

"It's always bad," she cried, whirling Bigote around and starting for home. "But I don't care, I'm going to have my ride. He had no business to bring her here, in the first place. I don't blame dear Mother a bit."

She galloped off down the wash until they came to the corral; and as they parted she kissed her lover, saying nothing. There was something in her eyes that was portentous, but all he knew was Anitra had rebelled.

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CHAPTER XXV

A Cowboy Joke

WINCHESTER IRONS and The Ten put their herd through to Ganado without losing a single cow, but the shipping pens were full. Long strings of empty cattle-cars stood waiting on the side-tracks while drunken punchers worked furiously at the chutes. It was Pony Deal's outfit and as Win glanced into the corrals he saw a string of brands that opened his eyes. Frying-pans, grind-stones, doll baby, necktie—every one a burn over Buff Hall's Hog Eye. Rustler brands—passed by the inspectors!

But this was Hall's business, and not his.

WINCHESTER had taken a contract to drive Smoky's cows to the railroad and ship them to Kansas City. Now he found the yards full, his own cars shoved aside and still more rustler herds waiting. Pony was making a clean-up while Buff, fighting mad, was battering at the gate of Maverick Basin. That barbed-wire fence with the sign across it:

CUT THIS FENCE AND BUY YOUR COFFIN.

Irons protested to the freight agent, drove his herd outside of town and went back to renew the battle. Feed was short around Ganado, all the pastures were taken and Smoky McMasters had another herd, waiting. All paid for and in charge of pick-up cowboys, any or all of whom might turn rustlers over night. And on top of all that Win had a bunch of horses, the pick of the Terrazas *caballada.*

It could be seen at a glance that the town belonged to Pony—the freight-yards, the cattle inspectors, the officers. Win was standing outside the station when he saw him drive past, and he knew him by his woman. Or wife, perhaps—the mysterious lady Irons had met riding away from Escondido. She was beautifully dressed in a russet suit that set off her glorious hair, and if she was unhappy over her fate she concealed it entirely. She looked up at him adoringly and Irons was startled by the radiance of her smile. And Pony Deal was smiling back at her.

Winchester caught only a glimpse of his high nose and keen eyes and the rather loud suit he wore. He looked like a professional gambler and had a cocky, confident air. Or so it seemed to Irons, who had learned to hate him on sight—and that reminded him of something else. He went down to the express office and called for his sawed-off shot-guns. They were liable to need them, any time.

He was taking a last look at the congested corrals when there was a clatter of hoofs behind him, the rattle of a buckboard and he met Pony Deal, face to face.

"Never mind that brand," he yapped. "It's my regular, registered iron and none of your dadburned business."

Irons looked him over from the top of the fence and saw he was out for war.

"Seems to me," he suggested, "you're taking a good deal for granted. I don't give a damn for your burned-over irons—"

The fierce, steel-blue eyes of Pony Deal flashed fire, but he did not go for his gun. In fact, he had no gun in sight—but Win knew there was a hide-out, somewhere.

"Then what do you want?" demanded Deal.

"A corral," answered Irons. "And a chance to ship my cattle."

"Well, you'll wait a long time," retorted Deal, "before you get either one. I've got this yard tied up for a week and you'll have to take your turn."

"*You're* the man that's horned in," accused Winchester. "I ordered those cars a week ago, but—"

"You cain't *git* 'em, hey?" broke in Pony; and laughed.

"Well, not right now," admitted Irons.

"No, and you won't git 'em," sneered Deal. "This is a one-man town and I'm *it*—understand? I don't want you around here, at all."

"I'll stay here," answered Win, "as long as I want to. And if I don't get those cars—"

"Well—what?"

THE gambler thrust out his beak and looked Irons in the eye.

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"I'll find out why," finished Irons.

"Yes? And then what?"

"None of your damn business," rapped our Winchester, and Pony Deal sat back and laughed. Then he popped his long whip, the team leapt ahead, and Irons started for the telegraph office. Four years in the Ranger service had taught him the means by which wrongs are righted in Texas. Not by complaining to freight-clerks or bought-out peace officers but by going over their heads. He wrote a brief telegram to the general freight agent and watched the operator until he had sent it. Then he scribbled a longer letter to the Cattlemen's Association which made the operator's eyes bulge.

It is the purpose of the Cattlemen's Association to look into all cases of brand-burning and rustling—and its officials know no fear or favor. Here was a railroad yard stuffed so full of cows with altered brands that the corrals would be crowded for a week. Win reported the bare facts and requested that an inspector be sent to look over the stock.

"Just a moment!" said the operator, starting to dart away; but Winchester flagged him with a six-shooter.

"You send that message right now," he ordered, "or I'll report you to the superintendent."

"Yes, sir," replied the telegrapher.

"Now have it repeated back," directed Win. "I want that for legal evidence. And if you flunkeys think you can play horse with me—"

"Yes, yes!" quavered the operator. But as soon as Irons was gone he streaked it for Deal's hotel.

The stock-yards of Ganado were a busy scene that night as Pony's cowboys emptied every corral and started the cattle out of town. They crowded them hard, for it was far to the protecting mountains and the inspectors would be hot on their trail; but Winchester Irons kept out of sight. Nobody knew where he was until about midnight when a bunch of JQ cowboys rode up to the corral Win had hired to hold the Terrazas horses.

"Throw down them bars," ordered the leader. And then, from the middle of the herd, a polite voice came to their ears.

"Gentlemen," it said, "I wouldn't touch them bars if I was you."

There was a moment of startled silence and then the leader spoke up.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"I'm nobody," returned the voice. "But here's a friend of mine you might recognize."

Against the darkened sky a sawed-off shotgun appeared and the leader reined away.

"Yes, I know the son-of-a-which," he answered, "and I don't like his looks a damned bit."

He rode off, laughing raucously, and the unknown laughed back. It was just another cowboy joke.

CHAPTER XXVI

Evil Tidings

THERE were corrals and to spare when Winchester Irons moved his herd into the yards at dawn—and a wire from the General Freight Agent assuring him that his shipment was appreciated. The switch-engine was waiting to spot his cars at the chutes and there wasn't a JQ hand in sight. They were gone—and Pony Deal was gone. He had met his equal in the American game of bluff—and it was not much of a bluff, at that.

But Smoky McMasters was waiting at Smugglers' Crossing and The Ten had no time to celebrate. To drink to their dauntless leader, Don Rifle, before whom all troubles disappeared. They hit the back trail that same evening—and met a messenger bearing evil tidings. It was Buffington Hall, himself, riding to summon Winchester and tell him that Anitra was gone.

"She's been kidnapped!" he wailed. "I warned her a thousand times, never to ride out of sight of the house. But the first thing we knowed she was *gone*. Kidnapped, by grab! And I know who done it: Pony Deal, and that woman of his! Yes, Helen—Anitra's mother!"

"What makes you think so?" inquired Irons, spurring ahead to get on the grounds. "Who was it that saw her last?"

"W'y, Henry, the Delaware Injun.

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He was watching her from the tower and, just like that, she disappeared. Going up that sandy wash that leads to Maverick Basin. You know—up to Cherry Crick!"

"Find any tracks?" asked Winchester.

"Didn't need to!" defended Buff. "I knowed in a minute jest what had happened; and I want you to he'p me, Win! Name any price you please but git me my daughter back. She's fallen into the hands of that unscrupulous scoundrel, Pony Deal."

He trailed off into a fit of passionate cursing, and Irons let him rave on. He was glad that Fausto Parral was dead, for it looked like some of his work. When he stole a man or woman there was no racing of horses, no gun-plays, no sign of any kind. They just disappeared, and it took a good tracker to find the wiped-out trail.

"Have to look at those tracks," he said at last, and Hall turned to glare at him.

"What you want to do that for?" he demanded. "Cain't you see who done it? My wife! She was coming down to see Anitra and I warned her away! Then she turned 'round and *stole* her! Waited till she started out on her ride—"

"Where's the Rangers?" broke in Irons.

"Danged if I know!" cursed Buff. "Cap'n Ross is in his dotage. Beginning to talk about Fausto Parral! Didn't the old walloper tell us he killed him? Well, now he's beginning to renig!"

"The hell!" exclaimed Irons, putting spurs to Blue; and he never slowed down until he loped into camp and found Ross sitting by the fire. Sitting on his heels and rubbing his nose with his fore-finger, as was his custom when deep in thought.

"Well!" challenged Win; and the Captain shook his head.

"It don't look right to me," he said. "That's just the way Fausto used to work."

"But didn't you say Fausto was dead?"

"Yes," admitted Ross. "But I might as well confess I ain't so sure of that, now. There's been things about the way these Hog-Eye cattle have been crossed that reminded me of Parral. Little things you'd never notice. And that hombre I shot in the river at Fronteras—he had a bald head, all right, but there wasn't any patch over his eye. Of course a patch is a thing that can be taken off and put on—and I don't reckon he slept with it, anyhow—But where you going, Win?"

"Out to look at those tracks!" called back Irons.

"Just a minute!" shouted the Captain. Then he grunted. Winchester was gone. Off like a shot—right in the middle of a sentence—and he was likely to keep going. Ross roused up and ran for his horse.

WIN was riding alongside the trail when the Captain came up, looking down over his horse's shoulder at the loping footprints of Bigote. The Rangers had followed them out—and back—but they had been careful not to kill the trail. Now they were up the river, scouting, but Ross had made up his mind.

"No use, Win!" he said. "I'm satisfied, right now, she's gone to Maverick Basin. Run off, to get away from her father and back with her mother again. But as I was a-saying when you rode off and left me—there's a chance she's been picked up by Parral. If she ain't—"

"Well—*what*?" demanded Winchester.

"She's all right," ended the Captain, and smiled. "That is," he added, 'she's safe with her mother. So I've sent my men up the river to cut off any Mexicans going south."

"Well, where do I come in?" exploded Win. "Am I going to stay in camp and watch you rub your nose while somebody steals my girl?"

"She'll come back," soothed Ross. "Or send you word. But if you ride in there after her, Pony Deal will sure ketch you—and he may not let you go. That is, until he's stole Smoky's cattle. You have to think these things out before you do anything rash, and it looks like a put-up job. I understand," he went on, "you dealt Pony a lot of misery when he was shipping them burned cattle at Ganado."

"Sure did!" boasted Irons. "And I'll deal him a lot more if I find he's stole Anitra."

"Looks to me," explained Ross, "like he's standing in with his wife to get you where he wants you. Up on front of that wire with the coffin sign on it, where he

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can shoot you full of holes. Now listen to me, boy, and I'll let you in on a secret. I've got an under-cover agent that works Maverick Basin and I've started him in, already. But if *you* ride in Pony will spot you, sure. And then, by the gods, he'll kill you."

"I believe you are right," said Win at last. But as he turned away he sighed.

CHAPTER XXVII

A Knife-Slash

IT was part of Don Rifle's system to think quick and act quick. Many a man has lost his life by stopping to think, but in this case the Captain was right. Pony Deal had been infuriated by the quick turn at Ganado by which all his plans had been upset. He had been playing for high stakes and making a clean-up until he had tried to run a bluff on Win. The inspectors were fixed, the freight agent was fixed, his cattle were going out by the thousand. Then, over night, he found himself whipped—on the run with all his herds.

Beyond a doubt he was sore, and this was his come-back. He had stolen Winchester's girl. Stolen her as the bandit, Parral, had so often tried to do, but failed. It was a custom of the country almost, this kidnapping of wives and daughters and holding them for ransom. Fausto Parral had carried it on for years—but among Americans it was something new. New and terrifying, and Irons had lost his nerve. He was afraid that something would happen to her. A beautiful creature like Anitra! And in a country where there was no law.

Only the law of the rifle and six-shooter, and the matching of keen wits against guile. It was getting worse and worse and Pony Deal, once aroused, was capable of almost anything. He was a natural-born killer—Irons could tell that by his eyes with their stony gambler's stare. But was he more than that? He had stolen one woman—would he try to steal another? Had he taken Anitra for himself?

It was wild thoughts like these that kept him awake long after the others were asleep, but he had fallen into a doze when a knife slashed down through his tent. He rolled aside as a clenched fist followed it and dropped a piece of paper on his bed. A message from the kidnappers—he knew it—which was why he did not shoot. He rushed out, instead, and caught a glimpse of the messenger as he fled. A small man on a mule and, against the sky, the sombrero of Bandy Storms.

Bandy wore his big hat crushed up on both sides, and he was heading west at a lope. Riding a mule! He was down from the mountains. Here was news of Anitra, at last. Winchester snatched up the paper and by the light of a candle read it twice before it made sense. Pony Deal had neglected to sign his name, but nothing could disguise his style. It was cock-sure—defiant—venomous.

> Stay away from my step-daughter, Anitra. She came to us of her own free will and is safe in the care of her mother. We have other plans for her future than having her marry a gun-slinger. So stay away or I'll kill you.

Win made a dash for the Rangers' camp, narrowly escaping getting shot by the sentry, and Captain Ross read the letter over slowly.

"That's Pony Deal, all right," he said at last. "And the scoundrel is out to kill you. Just let me keep this note—it might come in handy later. In case he happens to ketch you."

"He won't," cursed Irons. "I'll get him before he can wink."

"That's what he's hoping for," observed Ross. "He wants you to come in shooting. Then he'll build up a case of self-defense and another of my boys will be gone. But you tell him, if you have time, that I'm keeping this letter as evidence of premeditated murder. My advice, though, is to stay away."

HE settled back on his pillow and closed his eyes, and Winchester stepped out into the night. By the stars it was still short of midnight and Bandy would have a long ride home. But the Captain was right. It would be playing right into Pony's hand to go in where he was sure to get caught. And that fence across Cherry Creek Canyon—they had a gate there now, but it was padlocked. The cliff on one side was a thousand feet high, and on the other side the

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brush would turn a bear.

He went back to his tent but as he stretched out on his cot Bandy's knife-slash stared him in the face. He hadn't needed to rip the tent wide open in order to deliver that note. The little squirt had forgotten who he was dealing with. A sergeant of the Rangers, who had whipped better men than Pony Deal. He jumped out of bed and stamped on his boots and ten minutes later he was gone.

There was a mule-track on the trail that led up the wash, but Bandy's mount would be tried by now. It was a long, rough ride to the mouth of Cherry Creek and Bandy had come further than that. He had brought that message from Deal's headquarters, the Stone House in Maverick Basin. Many dark tales had come out of the mountains of this fortress, with its cell-like rooms. Each one built separate from the rest of the house—every door of solid oak with steel bars. It was Pony Deal's prison as well as his fort, and Irons was taking a chance.

He rode hard up the long wash, and west over a thousand low ridges; and, just at daylight, he spied Bandy Storms jogging along, sound asleep in the saddle. The mule snorted and looked back. Bandy raised his head and grunted. Then he came to life with a jerk, but Winchester did not have him covered. This called for startegy and guile, and he needed Storms alive.

"Morning, Bandy," he hailed. "Nice mule you've got. Easy-gaited."

"Where the hell are you going?" demanded Storms suspiciously, swinging his mount around to face him.

"Up to see Pony Deal about that letter you brought down. I showed it to Captain Ross and he advised me to ride after you and find out if Anitra is there."

"That's none of your business," snarled Bandy.

"It's the Ranger's business," stated Win. "And the Captain swore me in again. Kidnapping a white woman is something we won't stand for. I want to see Pony Deal."

"You'll never go in with me," replied Storms; and Winchester spurred in closer.

"You'll take me in," he said, "or I'll leave you by the trail. Or maybe you'd rather shoot it out?"

"No-o," decided Bandy. "But the gate is right ahead and no outsiders can pass."

"Not even a man that's been sent for by Pony Deal? Think it over—and remember this. There's a hereafter coming for any man that kills a Ranger. It just isn't done, that's all."

"Well, mebby you're right," grumbled Storms, and led on up to the gate.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Maverick Basin

A HIGH, limestone cliff overhung the barbed-wire fence which barred the way into Maverick Basin, and from a cave at its base three bearded men peered out, their guns on the stranger at the gate.

"Who's that?" they demanded of Bandy, and he fidgetted as he spoke his little piece.

"A feller the chief sent down for. Hurry up and unlock."

"What's his name?" asked their leader, staring; and Irons spoke up boldly.

"Winchester Irons, of the Texas Rangers."

"The hell!" exclaimed the rustler, starting back; but after a silence he unlocked the gate.

"All right, Bandy," he said, "if he was sent for by the chief." And Win rode on without looking back.

It was a nervy thing to do, but that cut off all discussion; and of course it was all a bluff. The Captain did not know Win had started, but Win knew Ross would back him up. Anything to get through and locate Anitra before it was too late. And if she was *not* there—if Deal's letter was a blind—Captain Ross would want to know that.

They rode up a deep-worn trail, through the brush and over boulders, and Bandy led on sourly.

"You damn fool," he said as they headed up a rocky slide, "you don't know what you're running into. But all right—I warned you. The Stone House is right ahead." And he went back into his sullen silence.

The creek opened out into a wide, grassy valley where stolen cattle and horses grazed. The limestone cliff fell away and to the north a higher wall took

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its place. It was the Rim, the broken edge of the immense prairie above where Pony Deal had his JQ Ranch. Maverick Basin was his back yard, his rustlers' hide-out—the JQ was his front door, where everything was clean and respectable.

A stray rider passed by, staring hard at Irons before he galloped on to the house, and Bandy showed his teeth in a grin. Then, forty men at once, they came boiling out the doors and Win met the eyes of Pony Deal. He was dressed in his riding clothes, with two pistols in his gun-belt, which he hitched up before he spoke.

"Well?" he challenged. "What is it, Mister? Ain't you kinder off your range?"

"Maybe," answered Winchester. "Captain Ross sent me up to inquire into this kidnaping."

"Kidnaping!" repeated Deal, and his men looked at each other. "I reckon there's some mistake."

"I hope so," responded Irons. "I hope she's here, but the Captain thinks its Fausto Parral. So he asked me to come up and look for Miss Hall, and if she's all right everything is O. K...."

"Uhhr!" grunted Deal. "So you're back in the Rangers, hey? Instead of raising hell with my shipping. Well, your bluff is called, Mister. You're no Ranger and I know it. Where's your star? Let me see your papers."

Win hesitated — just an instant too long—and Pony broke into a laugh.

"I'm somewhat of a liar, myself," he observed. "You're up here after that girl."

IRONS hesitated again—his bluff had been called. Then he tried another tack.

"All the Rangers were gone—out looking for Parral—so he asked me to ride up here. I showed him Bandy's letter and he told me to overtake him. We came through the gate together."

"What?" yapped Deal, turning to glare at Storms; and Bandy began to flinch and squirm.

"He had his guns on me," he complained, "and he gave me my choice, either to pass him in or shoot it out."

"Then take them guns off of him!" blared back Pony. "And if he makes a crooked move—I'll croak him."

He hooked his thumb in his belt, and Winchester gave up his weapons.

"All right," he said. "I'm not looking for trouble. But what about the girl?"

"She's all right—with her mother!" rapped out Deal. "That is, if it's any of your business. You swelled-up toad, you can't run it over me. I've got you, and I'm going to keep you. That's a one-way trail up Cherry Creek. They come in, but they never go out."

He paused and regarded Irons with a fleeting smile.

"You poor fool," he laughed. "I'll learn you not to tangle with me. Lock him up, boys—and shoot him if he makes a break. This is pretty slick—I thought he would bite. Your girl isn't up here, at all."

He flung out his hand defiantly, and Irons was led off to his cell.

CHAPTER XXIX

Boss's Orders

"EH-HAY!" jeered Bandy Storms, looking in through the bars as he slammed the cell door on his enemy. "You're a bad man, hey? A sergeant in the Rangers! You can't fool Pony Deal!"

"No," retorted Irons, "and he can't fool the Rangers. Captain Ross will tame *him*—damned quick."

"Think so?" grinned Bandy. "Well, guess again." And he strode off, showing all his teeth.

Irons had to admit as he thought the matter over that every one of his bluffs had been called. Captain Ross had warned him to leave Pony Deal alone; and, as usual, his advice was correct. Some fit of madness had clouded Win's better judgment, and now he was on the inside looking out. As for Anitra, he had no idea whether she was there or not —Deal had told him both ways, and laughed. A bad man to monkey with, a dangerous character. And hot-headed —all set to shoot. Yet even so Pony would think twice before he ordered him killed.

Captain Ross was the law—as far as

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there was law—in all that Big Bend country; and if he could not take Maverick Basin with his company he could call in the whole Ranger force. And, against them, all the rustlers in Texas would not dare to make a stand. Winchester knew he was safe, or safe enough, and he settled down to wait. After all, the cell was an ideal lookout, and life went on as before.

On the second day a big gang of Mexicans brought in a herd of stolen cattle. Mavericks and Hog Eye cows, followed by unbranded calves and yearlings. Here was the center of a big pass-on system. While Smoky McMasters held the stage with his Terrazas cattle, the Mexicans were combing the range and running off Buff Hall's cows. Win studied their hard faces through the bars of his door, and more than one was from Fronteras. If Fausto was dead his old bandits still carried on and found the pickings good. Bandy Storms received the cattle and paid for them in cash, and Irons was getting a line on *him.*

But on the fourth day, when another bunch came in, his heart jumped and missed a beat. Behind the rustled cattle, big as life in his bib-overalls, rode Buster McCann, his friend. It was getting them all, this flood of Mexican cattle, this wealth of unbranded stock. As good a man as Buster had yielded to the strain, and he never liked the name of a thief. But why work for wages, or for five dollars a day, when the mavericks were there for the taking? Not a cow in his bunch showed a brand, but they were white-faced Herefords—and that showed they were Hog Eye stuff.

Winchester kept out of sight as his old friend came and went, shouting witticisms in *pelado* to his Mexicans. He had thrown in with them at last and become a "galvanized" Mexican, a white man gone native—and he looked it. His face was burned brick red, he wore a huge sombrero and used his single blanket for a serape. Another good man gone wrong—Win did not have the heart to hail him. And that night he made a key to his door.

ALL along he had had the feeling that Bandy was watching him, almost hoping he would make his escape. Then the chase would be on, they would catch him on the trail, and Storms would feed fat his ancient grudge. Long before, they had become enemies—when the Rangers had picked Bandy up—and this last encounter had fanned his hate white hot. But the time had come for Winchester to go—before Pony Deal and his men returned. He crushed a tobacco can, pulled it apart and folded the tin, then bit it into the shape of the key. He made it and tried it, but something bade him stay on—and that night two women rode in.

He could hear their voices faintly, as they passed on to Deal's cabin; and Bandy Storms' as he answered their questions. One woman was Mrs. Deal, and she seemed excited. But was the other Anitra? He could not tell. At the first peep of day he was up and at the grating, and through the bars he saw her horse at the gate. The zebra-striped buckskin, Bigote, that Buster had brought across as a present. She was there, then! But how could he reach her? And how could they make their escape?

Bandy Storms came early and passed in his breakfast, and for the first time he stopped to talk. It was evident he had heard some news, for of a sudden he was almost polite; but as Irons made answer he saw a head at the cabin door, and Mrs. Deal came running.

"Who is that?" she demanded, thrusting Bandy aside; and when she caught sight of Winchester she paled.

"Let that man out!" she commanded, imperiously; but Bandy shook his head.

"Can't do it," he said. "Boss' orders. Pony'd skin me alive if I did."

"Let him out!" she repeated, "or the Rangers will come and get him. Captain Ross sent word if a hair of his head was touched he'd sweep this basin clean. I—I'm afraid my husband will get killed."

"Don't worry," laughed Bandy. "That's only a bluff. And the chief will be back this evening."

"It is not!" she stormed. "And this evening will be too late. They've had a fight over the cattle and the Rangers whipped them off. I just know that Pony will be furious, and I rode down to turn this man loose."

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"Turn him loose if you want to," answered Storms defiantly. "But you'll never get my key. My orders were to keep him locked up, and if he broke his way out to kill him."

"You kill this boy," she shrilled, "and I'll kill *you!* Now you go away and mind your own business!"

"O. K.," shrugged Bandy, and as he went back to the bunk-house, she looked in at Winchester and smiled.

CHAPTER XXX

A Rescue

IT was the same appealing smile that glorified Anitra's countenance when she used to run to meet her lover; and he showed both his dimples in return.

"If you really want me out," he suggested, and fitted his tin key to the door. It squeaked and swung open, but she gasped and waved him back.

"Just a minute," she whispered, "until I run and get your horse."

"And guns," he added. "Bandy will kill me, sure."

"Well—anything," she answered, "to get you out of the way. Mr. Deal I know will kill you—and Captain Ross will kill *him*. But he's a good man, Mr. Irons, only hasty—"

Her voice trailed off into a sob as she turned away, but in no time she had his rigging and guns. Then she saddled her own horse and rounded up the pasture, returning with Iron's Blue.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she urged. "He may come anytime." But Winchester only shrugged.

"I'd like to see Anitra," he stated.

"You can't! You can't!" she cried. "Oh, please hurry—I'll ride with you."

"Why can't I?" he inquired; and she snatched the saddle away from him, swinging it expertly up on his horse.

"I'll tell you later," she promised. "Please believe me! I'm your friend. It is necessary to go. Right now."

There was the faint bellowing of a cow-herd in the distance and Bandy Storms stuck out his head. Then he ducked around the corner of the bunk-house and Win could hear him galloping off.

"Is Anitra all right?" he asked. "Then I reckon I'd better go."

He swung up reluctantly, with a last look at the cabin where she slept, and rode away down the trail. He had come up to get her, but this woman had talked him over. She had swayed him from his purpose. There had been fighting outside the basin and Pony Deal had been defeated. It would take hard riding to escape him. He spurred down the rocky slides and over the water-worn boulders, but Anitra's mother kept close behind. She was a wonderful rider, after years in the saddle, and she stayed with him clear to the fence.

"Open that gate!" she ordered as the startled guards rose up; and they passed her without a word. "I'll be back," she said, and smiled. Then she followed on, between them and Irons.

"Now," she began, as they rounded the first point. "Will you take a message to Captain Ross? Tell him Anitra is safe with her mother—I am sorry you could not stop to see her. But I give you my word she is there in that log cabin and the Rangers need not search any further. She was very unhappy with her father and has decided to live with me. You are a good man, Mr. Irons—will you do me a favor? Beg the Captain not to come in the Basin!"

She leaned over and touched his hand—a beautiful woman still—and Win consented with a smile. He had acted very rashly in entering that rustler's stronghold and Anitra's mother had saved his life. Better than anyone else she knew the temper of her husband, and his black moods when he was crossed.

"If he does," she went on, "a great many men will be killed. Anitra and I will be endangered. It is better to wait a few months, until these Mexican cattle have passed. Then I hope Mr. Deal will leave the country forever. He is just getting together a stake."

"I see," nodded Winchester. "But what about Anitra."

"We plan to take her with us," she replied. "Not to break off your engagement—to get her out of this country, which becomes more desperate every day. I was terrified to think of her, living alone at Escondido, with her father al-

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ways getting into trouble. Can you imagine how a mother's heart must ache to see her darling exposed to such dangers? That Mexican bandit, always trying to kidnap her? She is safer in Maverick Basin. And when we go away—to New York—to Europe—can't you see how much happier she will be?"

"Well—yes," admitted Win. "But we were going to be married. I was going to take her to El Paso. Has she told you anything about it?"

"Yes, yes, my dear boy," she smiled. "She talks of nothing else, I assure you. But Anitra is very young—she is not of legal age—and her parents must give their consent. They must think of her future and try to guard her happiness. But she loves you—very much."

"Then what do you expect me to do?" he demanded. "Let her go without a word? It will not be long until she becomes of age. Then where do her parents come in? Buff Hall has sprung that already, and *he* has refused *his* consent."

"Buff Hall," she said bitterly, "is a brutal, ruthless man. He wants you to stay and fight Pony. I heard all about it and I am proud of the answer you gave. I am very, very fond of you, Win."

She touched his hand again, and he found himself smiling. She was a good woman, he felt sure. But Pony Deal! Was he the man to look after Anitra?

"I thank you," he bowed, "but how does Mr. Deal feel? Do you think he would consent to our marriage?"

"No," she answered, frankly. "He is very much opposed to you. If he could I am sure he would kill you. But please don't oppose him—that is dangerous. Learn to wait—it will not be for long."

She swung her horse around, still gazing into his eyes, and with a touch of the spurs she was gone.

CHAPTER XXXI

A Prisoner

WINCHESTER was riding on down the wash when he saw a dust ahead. Then, before he could take cover, Captain Ross turned the corner and they halted, face to face.

"Well!" exclaimed the Captain with his quiet smile. "Here's my boy, as good as new. We were just going to ride in after you, but the old Iron's horse-shoe still works."

Win laughed and shook hands all around.

"Much obliged, boys," he said. "That's a bad place to go into. But Anitra's all right—I saw her mother up there—so you can turn around and ride back."

"Just a minute," suggested Ross, beckoning him out of the hearing of the rest. "Are you dead sure she is all right? She's practically a prisoner in the hands of Pony Deal, and her mother is in about the same boat. But she's nervy, I'll say that—she's not afraid of him. Now—tell me everything that happened.

He listened, rubbing his nose and frowning, and at the end he shook his head.

"Buff Hall got a message," he said, "that he'd better lay off that gang. Otherwise, Pony intimated, he'd never see his daughter again. You never actually saw her—only her mother and the horse—"

"But I heard her voice, in the night."

"I believe she's a prisoner," stated Ross. "She'll be held until Deal ships out his cattle. Buff's been up at Ganado, trying that game you worked, and the Cattlemen's Association is behind him. He can claim every cow that's got a burned brand, but Pony has given him warning. Don't you think we could slip in by some other trail and grab Anitra away? That would give us a chance to bear down on Pony Deal. We may have to do it, anyway."

"What other trail?" inquired Win. "I'm game, if there's half a chance. But Mrs. Deal seemed badly scared about something; and I heard cattle lowing, when I left."

"She was scared," observed the Captain, "over a letter I sent her. Something like that one Pony sent you. I told her if a hair of your head was touched we'd come in and clean them out."

"It worked!" grinned Irons. "She rode in that night and turned me loose at dawn. But she begged me, before she left, not to try to get Anitra, and I think she had a good reason."

"Then perhaps," suggested Ross,

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"we'd better wait a few days and see how Buff Hall comes out. He's crazy to get back his daughter; but he's got his hands full, over on the railroad. If he can keep Deal from shipping those stolen cattle he's got him whipped, right there."

"Well," said Win, "I think we owe something to Mrs. Deal for getting me out of there alive. So let's turn around and go back to the crossing and that will help square her with Pony!"

"Good enough!" agreed the Captain and without more words he led the way back to camp.

IT was just as well, for a mutiny had broken out among the Mexicans across the Rio Grande. Smoky McMasters had quit his post, no more cattle were being crossed, and the big Colonel had been hanged by his own men. His body swung gently from the telegraph pole from which so many other "traitors" had hung, and the Americans turned their faces away. It was something they could never get used to, these bodies left swinging in the wind, and it was a portent of more trouble to come. The soldiers had got liquor and were brawling among themselves; and, worst of all, the women of Fronteras had joined in heart and soul. Then, on the third day, a column marched in from Presidio del Norte and the firing squads stamped out the revolt.

Colonel Aguilar, the new commanding officer, set word that all was well, the Americans were welcome to cross; but no one took him up. Even stout-hearted Smoky packed his money away and left, in response to a sudden hunch. Something told him that he had played his string out and the great Law of Averages would get him. Sooner or later, with one revolution after the other, he would end up against the wall.

Everything was tied up, not a cow could be crossed, and Smugglers' Crossing began to quiet down. The cavalry drilled daily with flashing sabers to put the fear of God in their hearts; while across the river the Mexicans loafed in quarters to show that their intentions were good. Buffington Hall came riding back, the Rangers rode away; and then, down the trail from Maverick Basin, Pony Deal came with all his men.

There was a big dust up the wash, the bell at Escondido clanged a warning and the Americans rode up to look. Then they spurred inside the gate and manned the walls—Buff Hall and his cowboys, Winchester Irons and The Ten. Pony had promised more than once to come down and clean them out, and he had a hundred bearded outlaws behind him. But when Don Rifle and The Ten shoved out their sawed-off shotguns the rustlers reined up short.

"Buff Hall!" shouted Deal, riding out in front, "you son-of-a-goat, you give me back our daughter or I'll—"

"*Your* daughter!" yapped back Buff. "Who called you in on this? And who are you talking about? Anitra?"

"You know very well!" raged Pony. "Don't think for a minute you can bluff *me!* You sneaked in and stole her while I was off with my cattle—"

"I did not!" challenged Hall. "And damn you, Deal, if you've let her be kidnapped *I'll kill you!* I haven't seen Anitra since you stole her!"

"Why—why! Ain't she here?" demanded Pony Deal.

"No-o!" bawled back Buff. "I'll leave it to these men. Have any one of you seen her, boys?"

"No!" they answered, and as Pony began to curse Buffington Hall called him everything he could think of.

"You dad-burned cow-thief!" he hollered. "You Mexicanized son-of-a-goat! Why don't you come out and fight like a man instead of holding my daughter a prisoner? And then letting her be kidnapped, you whelp!"

"Jest a minute!" broke in Deal, holding up his hand for peace; and his wife rode up beside him.

CHAPTER XXXII

"IT LOOKS LIKE FAUSTO PARRAL!"

HER beautiful hair was flying in the wind and her horse was flecked with foam. Every voice was hushed as Mrs. Deal leaned over, but only her husband heard her. He started as if struck by a whip, leaned closer to ask another question; then he swung his horse and set off at a gallop

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towards the camp where the soldiers were lined up. It was none of their business, this war between rival cattlemen; but when Deal dashed up and spoke to Captain Latham the bugle sounded: To Horse.

"What is it? What's the matter?" demanded Hall; but his former wife ignored him.

"Mr. Irons!" she called. "May I ask you to come down here? Anitra has been kidnapped by Mexicans!"

An American girl kidnapped by Mexicans! It was that which gave the affair an international aspect and called for the intervention of the soldiers. No longer was it a quarrel between rustlers and cattlemen—Captain Latham rode out half way across the ford and held up his hand for a talk. But, while he waited for Colonel Aguilar, Win was listening to Anitra's mother. She was haggard and worn from her long ride from Maverick Basin, and her eyes were big with excitement.

"I have a message for you," she whispered. "From Buster McCann. He says to stay here until he sends you word—he's following the men that stole Anitra."

"But suppose," Win objected, "he doesn't send word. Suppose he never comes back. I happen to know he's thrown in with these Mexicans—"

"Yes, yes: but he's still your friend. After my husband and his cowboys had gone he rode in with a band of cattle—and when I told him what had happened he began to look for tracks. Mr. Deal had been so sure she had been stolen by Mr. Hall he never stopped for anything. And, right down by the pasture gate, Buster saw where she had been seized by two men wearing sandals. She had gone down to catch her horse—I think she had caught it, for they put her on Bigote and rode off."

She paused and gasped—then she clasped her heart and spoke slowly.

"He said to tell you," she went on, "to wait at Smugglers' Crossing. He would follow their trail into Mexico. And he said this:

" 'It looks like Fausto Parral.' "

"God!" breathed Win; and stood silent. He had sensed it, all the time. Captain Ross had been mistaken—he had not killed the bandit chief. The man he had shot had not been Parral—or, if so, Fausto had lived and escaped. Perhaps sunk under the water unharmed, or floated down the river, wounded. Ross had noticed signs of his handiwork in the way the cattle had been crossed—and he had been bringing them across to sell Deal. Parral had been a confederate of this man who was now demanding his step-daughter back.

"Mrs. Deal," spoke up Irons, "what did he mean by that? Is Fausto Parral still alive?"

"Yes," she said. "Still alive."

"Has he been bringing in cattle to your husband? Has he been where he could see Anitra?"

SHE nodded, trying to blink back the tears; then broke down in heart-rending sobs.

"I—I didn't understand," she pleaded. "I love her so much—that's why I took her. Don't you think you can get her back?"

"I'll try," he answered. "But I can't wait on Buster McCann. He's a galvanized Mex—more Mexican than he is white man—"

"But he told me particularly you were to stay right here. And I know he is your friend. Didn't he give you that fine horse for Anitra? He'd do anything in the world to save her!"

"Yes, but was Buster with Fausto Parral?"

"No, he worked by himself. He brought in nothing but unbranded cattle. The poor fellow was trying to be honest. He told me one time when I spoke about it that he didn't like the name of thief."

It was the very phrase that Irons remembered, and yet where did McCann get Bigote? Where did he get his sturdy black and the other horses he rode? His whole life seemed centered upon acquiring blooded horses—and how else could he do it except by stealing them? And yet there was something about Buster that Win liked.

He paused to think it over, looking out at the emissaries in the middle of the river, waving their arms and shouting. Pony Deal was talking furiously, Colonel Aguilar was defiant, Captain Latham left quite out of it. But Mrs. Deal could not

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stop talking. She was protesting all over again her good intentions when she saw Buffington Hall, edging in on them.

"What's that you say" he demanded as she glared at him. "What's that about Fausto Parral? Have you let that devil kidnap my darling daughter while Pony was running off my cows?"

"I wasn't talking to you!" she answered, tartly.

"Well, I'm talking to *you!*" he came back. "Ain't I got a right to know? Ain't Anitra my own girl that I raised from a baby when her mother ran off and left her?"

"Oh, Buff!" she exclaimed. "Is this the time for that, when our daughter is in such danger? Why don't you *do* something, like Pony out there, instead of scolding around about everything?"

She stopped short to stare, for the conference had broken up and Deal was spurring toward them. He was laughing, and Hall began to curse.

"Go ahead!" jerred Pony. "Don't let me interrupt. I've made a deal with Colonel Aguilar to buy all his cattle if he'll give Anitra back to *me.*"

"To you!" yelled Buff. But words failed him, and Win moved away where he could think.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A Galvanized Mex.

THAT was hardly the time to pull off a cow-trade, but Pony had made a good one. All those Terrazas cattle at ten dollars a head delivered on the American side. But Colonel Aguilar was a close trader himself. He had offered to send out all his soldiers to bring back the American girl, and to punish her kidnappers with death. *But*—the Americans must buy his cattle and pass them across the Rio Grande. Otherwise he would kill every Gringo that crossed, to avenge the destruction of Fronteras.

Ah, there it was again—the burning of Fronteras! Buffington Hall ran over shouting to take it out on Don Rifle, who had led his Ten through the town. They had shot down the Constitutionalist flag. Killed men—though they were bandits—in Villa uniform. Now, when they needed the good will of this Colonel, it rose up again to plague them. Don Rifle listened a minute, opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it and rode out of sight. It was natural of old Buff to give off at the head and seek scape-goats for all his mistakes. But if anything was going to be done to save Anitra it would have to be done by himself. Already Pony Deal and his men were getting nervous for fear that the Rangers would return. They were drifting towards the hills—and Mrs. Deal with them. She too had made a mistake.

Irons wondered now if Anitra had not been a prisoner from the first. Lured to the Basin by a mother's love—held for his own purposes by Pony Deal. But now, in this crisis, the mother could only weep and wave a frantic hand as they fled. One thing Winchester knew—the promises of the Mexican Colonel would never be fulfilled. The fine, Latin hand of Fausto Parral was to be seen all through this coup, now that they knew he was still alive.

Through his "Women of Fronteras," now *soldaderas* at Double Adobes, he had started the futile revole which had covered up his crafty foray—getting rid, incidentally, of the stern Colonel Delgado, who now decorated a telegraph pole. He had ever been an enemy of the destroyers of Fronteras, but no friend of men like Fausto. Stiff-necked and stubborn in his devotion to Pancho Villa, he had paid for his loyalty with his life.

But this Colonel Aguilar, though he had put down the uprising, was nevertheless easier to handle. He had a flair for intrigue—for making fair promises and demanding much in return. Winchester had a hunch he was standing in with Fausto, for he had forbidden all Americans to cross. And if they crossed with arms—the adobe wall, the *fusilado.* That would make it doubly easy for Parral. Yet cross Win must, for Anitra was there, and the promise he had given her counted nothing. The big question was, should he wait on Buster McCann when every moment was precious?

DON RIFLE was still thinking it over when a ragged boy came towards him—a Mexican boy, covered with mud.

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"*Aqui, muchacho!*" he beckoned; and smiled, to give him courage to speak.

"Sin Ropa says," he stammered, "to follow me. I will lead you to the man you want."

Sin Ropa! The Mexican name for Buster, who so often complained about having no clothes.

"That is good," agreed Irons. "Is it far?"

"Very far!" shrilled the kid, sliding his hand out towards the Sierras—and Irons saw he was pointing towards Fronteras! The old bandit stronghold of Fausto Parral—and that gave him another thought. Fausto himself, the Fox of Fronteras, might have sent this boy to betray him, to lead him into his hands. And, once caught, his death would be long and painful.

"What kind of a horse rode No Clothes?" he asked.

"A good horse! A big black!"

"And the lady?"

"*No hay*—there was none!" shrugged the kid.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" questioned Irons.

"From far up the river," returned the boy. "He said you would give me a peso."

"Very well," nodded Winchester, and caught up a horse to carry his guide to Fronteras. Since someone must be trusted, why not this Mexican goat-herder—and rollicking, rough-and-tumble Buster? He had a good heart, drunk or sober—or he had had, before he turned Mex. There was the crux, for a galvanized Mexican oftener than not turned against his own people. But, since go he must, Win gave the kid his peso and they swam the river after dark.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The Garotte

THE ruins of Fronteras were not so far, the way Don Rifle rode, but all the houses were dark, save one. It was in the big building across the square from the church, and the goat-herder tapped on the door. Then, as footsteps came towards it, he was gone and Irons reached for his gun. He had come in peace, since he must find Anitra first; but as the door was flung open he smelled treachery.

Men rushed out from dark corners and fell upon him from behind and he went down, cursing helplessly. The trap had been set and he had walked right into it. The full glare of that open door had picked him out like a spotlight and four strong men rode him to the floor. Then his guns were taken away, he was yanked to his feet; and before him, smiling evilly, appeared Parral.

He was attired in gala costume, sitting regally on a high box; but only by his blind eye did Irons know him. A heavy black beard covered almost all his face except his eyes, his falcon nose and gleaming teeth. Even his name had been changed and they addressed him as *Peludo*, the Hairy One.

"Very good," he nodded as the guards bound Don Rifle's hands. "Now bring her." And he nodded towards a door.

Anitra came forth slowly, her eyes on the floor, her face frozen with a deadly fear; and Peludo fixed his good eye upon her. Even now, in his moment of triumph, it revealed a dumb admiration, a dog-like adoration of his goddess. He regarded her in silence, then turned to Winchester and spoke.

"Behold, Don Rifle," he said, "the fairest nymph of all this land. And yet she refuses my love."

He paused, for Anitra had looked up quickly and had seen her lover, his hands tied.

"O-oh!" she moaned. "You too?"

"Yes!" nodded Parral. "I have sent for your lover to add his persuasions to mine. I have you in my power, but always Don Fausto is the gentleman. He is a poet, a sybarite, who desires all a woman's love or none. Can you understand that, my little dove?"

He beckoned her to a place beside him, but Anitra stood resolutely erect.

"No!" she said. "I will die first."

"But why die?" he argued, a sly look in his one eye, "when all life lies before you? Have you no thought, no pity for him? He has crossed into Mexico armed, which by law is punishable with death. Colonel Aguilar has given me orders to execute all such—and this man, as you know, not six months ago, burned Fronteras to the ground. But still, he

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has one chance. Are you willing to see him die?"

"Why, what do you mean?" she asked.

He sighed, with a wicked look at Don Rifle—who stood silent, biding his time. In his desperate attempt to reach her in time he had thrown himself into the bandit's power. Now he set his whole mind on the problem of how to make his escape. To escape and take her with him—but the odds were all against them. Parral might be a little cracked, but he was ruthless as a snake; and this sly approach, this poetic affectation, was only part of a game he played. Like a cat with a trembling mouse which he loved to torture and tease before, in sheer weariness, he devoured.

"My pretty maiden," he said. "How can I convey to you the thought which is in my mind? I have found with other women, less fair than you, that when their lovers were captured and sentenced to death they would give anything to save them. Anything. So, knowing your reluctance, I engaged another American to bring your lover to me. He refused—asked a great price. But, being a Gringo, he agreed. He sent a messenger to Smugglers' Crossing, telling Don Rifle to seek you here, and so I caught him neatly."

HE paused, to laugh mockingly as Win's eyes grew wild—then kept on to his point.

"I wished to see," he said, "whether you cared to save his life. Otherwise," and he scowled, "it will be a pleasure, I assure you, to avenge the destruction of Fronteras."

He clapped his hands and two men, dressed in black, lugged in an ancient garotte. It was a mere stool with an upright for a back, and an iron ring the size of a man's neck that could be tightened by a huge screw behind—and Anitra divined its use. She trembled and turned paper-white, but Winchester shook his head. A thousand times he had warned her never to listen to the promises of Parral. Even among his own people his duplicity had become a byword. Win was telling her never to submit.

"No," she said faintly, and Fausto shrugged cynically.

"Are the Americans so scrupulous?" he observed, half to himself; and he slapped his hands again. But instead of the executioner, to crush out her lover's life, Buster McCann was shoved in through the door. He met their eyes without flinching until he glanced at Anitra—then he blushed and hung his head.

"You?" she cried, starting back; and he blinked as her tears began to flow.

"Yes," he confessed. "I'm the man. I sold my best friend—on a pinch. It was either him or me, so I sent a boy to get him. But I never got my money!" he added roughly.

"I say," he repeated, walking over towards Fausto and digging him in the ribs as he passed, "I never got that thousand dollars!"

Parral drew away, his bad eye flashing fire; then he leapt to his feet and gave Buster such a kick that he landed him half-way to the door.

"Out of my sight!" he cursed. "Is this a time to talk of money? Boot him out, I say! Boot him out!"

"But the money!" clamored Buster, scrambling up; and Fausto laughed as they flung him outside.

"A-ah, *carai*, these Americans!" he muttered. "That is all they think of—gold. But here is one who shall be punished."

He jerked his thumb towards Irons and turned to glance at Anitra.

Strap him into the garotte," he commanded.

CHAPTER XXXV

The Hairy Ape

WITH his arms tied behind him at the elbows and the iron ring around his throat, Don Rifle sat sweating in the presence of Parral, who bared his teeth malevolently.

"Ah, Gringo!" he mocked. "Your boasted courage is gone. And see, your bride-to-be weeps. She cannot think of life without you, and yet she will let you die. But I say to her now—if she has learned to love one man she can learn to love another. And I am no common Mexican. I am descended from the *gente fine* of Spain—from the true, fight-

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ing nobility of Madrid—why should I beg and implore? If she will not come to me gladly I will send her back to her mother and punish this traitor as he deserves!"

He stepped around behind the garotte and gave the screw an experimental twist.

"Go! Go!" he shouted harshly, waving the men in black away. "How can this maiden respond to my pleadings with you two louts looking on? This is something I can attend to alone."

He slammed the door behind them and twisted the screw again, until it closed tight against Win's throat. Another twist or two and the point would pierce his neck; but Fausto released it, instead.

"Will you give the word," he asked, glancing at Anitra, "for me to end this miscreant's life. He is a man I have learned to hate, and to kill him will be a pleasure. But give me a kiss, instead."

"No!" spoke up Irons. "Do nothing of the kind. This bandit does not know that the soldiers of Colonel Aguilar are advancing to surround Fronteras."

"Do I not?" scoffed Parral, "when the Colonel and all his men are numbered among my friends? They may come, indeed, but it will be to drink my liquor and dance at my wedding feast."

"But the troop of American Cavalry at Roofless Adobe! Will they, too, dance at your feast? You have invaded the United States and carried off this woman. That is a breach of international law."

"Perhaps," shrugged Fausto. "But what is law to me, who have been a bandit all my life?"

"There is a law beyond the law," stated Don Rifle quietly. "Among the Texas Rangers—my friends. Any man who kills a Ranger signs his own death warrant. No matter where he flees, they will get him."

"But have they got me?" mocked Parral.

"Have you ever killed a Ranger?" came back Win; and the bandit stopped to consider.

"No! he said at last. "But I will kill one, here and now, unless—" And he turned to Anitra.

The long silence was broken by a knock at the door.

"Don Peludo! Señor!" shouted a voice. "The soldiers are coming! They are close!"

"Go away!" yelled back Fausto in a fury. "The soldiers are my friends. I have made an agreement, which the Colonel will keep. He will not trouble me. Now go!"

"But Señor!" clamored another voice. "I have this minute arrived from Double Adobes. The American, Pony Deal, has made a trade with Colonel Aguilar to buy all his cattle at the ford. For this price, alone Señor! That the girl shall be returned unharmed."

A STRING of oaths poured from Fausto's lips as he leapt out and slammed the door behind him. But the next moment it was jerked open again and the men in black stepped in. They were armed now, with carbines and pistols, and one stood at each of the doors.

"*Señores!*" spoke up Irons, "what the messenger says is true. I myself saw Colonel Aguilar and Pony Deal shake hands—will you lighten this pressure a little?"

"Not a touch!" declared the tall bandit, roughly. "If anything I would tighten it up."

He stood glaring, and Anitra was turning away when at the back door there came a great knock.

"Open up, *cabrones!*" a hoarse voice shouted. "Open up, or I will kick in your door!"

"What do you want?" demanded the guard.

"I want my money!" answered the voice. "The thousand dollars for which I sold my friend and sent my soul to hell."

There was a thud, the door flew open, and Buster staggered in. He was drunk.

"Where is that goat's son, Peludo?" he cried; and the tall guard began to laugh.

"He has gone out to see some friends, *borracho,*" he responded. "A little later he will be back."

"Yes. '*Poco tiempo—poco tiempo,*' that's all you Mexicans know. But what is this on his neck?"

He stumbled over to Irons and untwisted the screw, while the big guard tried to push him aside.

"No!" insisted McCann. "You can-

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not treat him like this. He was my friend, *hombres,* before I betrayed him."

He laid hold of the heavy strap and began to unbuckle it.

"But no," reasoned the guard, trying again to pull him away; and No Clothes shouldered him off.

"Listen!" he pleaded. "Am I to be left with nothing? After this woman had been kidnapped I followed on her trail and Peludo, the hairy ape, caught me. He gave me my choice, to be killed at once or to betray this fine man, my friend. Well, I sold him—for one thousand dollars. But *hombres,* I have not been paid. All right, then—I will take the man."

He laid hold of the other buckle and, as the little guard jabbed him, he l[illegible] him flat with a back-hand blow. Then [illegible] with a grunt he slugged the big guard on the chin and snatched away his pistol as he fell.

"Take that!" he cursed, smashing him over the head with it. "And you!" He hit the other one.

"All right, folks," he said, straightening up. "The horses are out behind."

CHAPTER XXXVI

"Poor Buster!"

BUSTER raised his eyebrows in a delighted grin as he threw Don Rifle loose. Then he kicked over the garotte and motioned them out the back door.

"I'll be along in a minute," he said.

"But hold on!" spoke up Winchester, grabbing him. "Where're you going? What's the idea?"

"Going out to bash old Pedulo over the head," explained McCann. "You take the girl and beat it."

"No!" ruled Win. "We all go together, or fight it out. I've felt hard against you, Buster, but—"

"Oh, that's all right," answered No Clothes. "I had to act the part—Head back for the river and git across anyhow. I'll stay and take care of Parral."

"No, please come!" begged Anitra, seizing his hand; and he followed along behind her, laughing.

"Got the best three hawses in the country," he crowed, as they hurried out into the back-yard. "And here's your gun-belt, Win. Follow me, now and ride like hell."

He swung up on his big black, Irons helped Anitra on to Bigote and at a signal they dashed down the alley. Buster crossed the main street and hit into another alley, which ended in a rocky goat-path. Then they plunged down a steep slope with a hundred dogs after them and headed for the Rio Grande.

"Pretty work!" chuckled McCann as he reined in on the plain and looked back. "I shore thought you was a goner, Win. But I was looking through the key-hole and I'd've put up a fight for Anitra. That is—I mean Miss Hall."

"No, you can call me Anitra," she [illegible] and leaned closer to take his hand. "You're a fine, noble man, Mr. McCann, and I knew you were trying to save me."

"Shore was," he admitted. "But I had to go pretty far. You can call me Buster, if you want to."

"And Buster," put in Irons, "you're one jim-dandy actor. You had me fooled all the time."

"Didn't I, though?" laughed McCann. "You'd've killed me for a nickel. I could feel you tightening up to knock me cold when I started to untie them straps. That's why I made that talk like I did, so you'd remember we used to be friends."

"Used to be!" repeated Win. "You can have my shirt, Buster, anytime. But say, I believe we're being followed."

He held up his hand for silence and they could hear the distant rush of galloping horsemen.

"Nope," decided McCann. "They're just riding wild—trying to cut us off at the river."

"Let's head for Comanche Crossing!" proposed Irons, and Buster loped off through the night.

It was dark when they approched the ford but in the east the morning star was glowing and the first dawn lit up the hills. They halted to breathe their horses, and over a roll of the prairie they could make out distant riders, coming fast.

"Not a chance!" laughed Buster. "They ain't a hawse in all Mexico that can ketch up with these three we've got. But—perhaps Miss Anitra needs a rest."

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"No!" she declared. "I'm tired, I'll admit. And hungry—I haven't eaten for days. But I'll never, never stop until we get across that river. I can't stop, with him behind."

SHE shuddered and Win braced her in the saddle.

"We'll just stop a few minutes," he said.

Buster fumbled in his saddle-bag and fetched out a bottle. "Try a snort of that," he advised.

"No, no!" she protested faintly. "It would go to my head in a minute. Haven't you *anything* to eat?'

"Well," he mumbled, digging deeper, and brought out a strip of jerked beef.

"Oh, thank you!" she said, and though it was hard as iron she gnawed at it with her firm, white teeth. "It's delicious!" she smiled as Buster pounded it into shreds on his saddle-horn.

"All right," he nodded, with a glance at Win; and they headed north on the lope.

The rolling plain became more broken as they neared the Rio Grande and they were riding up out of a swale when, from over the high ground to the right, a troop of horsemen came galloping to cut them off.

"That's Fausto!" shouted back Buster and took it on the run, turning left to get out of the trap. They had been saving their horses for just such a run and the black went hammering on ahead. Bigote galloped bravely after him and Win's Blue brought up the rear. When they topped the next roll their pursuers were far behind. All except their leader—he was nearer.

"That's Fausto!" repeated Buster. "I'd know that bright sorrel, anywhere. Wouldn't mind having him,' he added.

He looked back again as they dipped down towards Comanche Crossing, then pulled out his rifle and stepped off behind a rock, waving them on as they tried to stop.

"Take her across the river," he shouted to Win, and they kept on without breaking their stride. Buster was a man who could take care of himself—and he had a grudge to settle with Parral.

There was a shot behind as they plunged into the water, and the sound of racing horses, heading west. Then, far upstream, an outburst of heavy firing—and silence. Win glanced at Anitra, who burst into tears.

"Poor Buster!" she sobbed. "They got him."

CHAPTER XXXVII

Comanche Crossing

"HE was a good man," said Winchester, still listening up the river. "I'll make a smoke, so he'll find us if he's alive. But what did he ride clear up there for?"

"To lead them away from us!" sighed Anitra. "Oh, I can't ever think of him as dead. Isn't it wonderful how he planned and schemed to save us! And now it has come to this!"

She bowed her head despondently and Win got busy with his fire.

"He'll come out of it," he predicted. "A man as smart as he is! And I know he killed Peludo. But why didn't he cross, the way he promised?"

He threw green brush on the flames to make a dense smoke and drew Anitra closer to the fire.

"We'll sit here and get good and dry," he said. "I'll bet you he shows up, pretty soon."

"I never even thanked him," she mourned. "He isn't a handsome man, but there's something about him—something that tells you he's got a big heart."

"Big as a bear's," agreed Irons. "But the country got him—he'd turned rustler. When they had me locked up in Maverick Basin I saw him come in with some cattle. Wet cattle, at that—although there wasn't a mark on them. I felt so bad to see he'd turned thief I never even spoke to him."

"I don't care!" she flared back. "I don't care if he is a thief—even a murderer! I'll never forget when he crossed the river after me and Peludo fell back and trapped him. They brought him up, laughing; and Buster was laughing back. But when they gave him his chance—either to betray you or be shot—he told them to go ahead. Go ahead and shoot him!

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"They would have, too; but just as they stood him up I could see his rugged face change. He's a marvellous actor, isn't he? I could see that he had some scheme. He began to cry and beg. He said you were his friend—the best friend he had in the world—and if he ever gave you up, his soul would go to hell. But he'd do it for a thousand dollars!

"Oh, how they laughed at that, and called him a money-grubbing Yanqui! I couldn't understand their pelado Spanish very well, but I could see he had completely fooled them. He knew, Win, how much you loved me, and that you'd take any chance to save me. So he bargained and bargained until they finally gave in and agreed to pay the full price. Then he called up a little goat-herder who had been looking on and instructed him just what to do. Something told me, right then, that you'd come and save me. Only of course I was terribly afraid!"

She put her arm around him and gave him a long kiss, and Winchester heaved a sigh.

"I had a hunch," he said, "that Buster was trying to help me. But after seeing him with those cattle I couldn't make up my mind. He'd turned *pelado,* I knew that, and was stealing your father's mavericks—"

"But was that so terrible?" she demanded.

"No-o," he conceded. "But when an American turns galvanized Mex, he throws in with them, every time. I knew he'd been my friend—and he'd given you Bigote! He'd sent me word by your mother to stay right there at Smugglers' Crossing—"

"Mother!" she cried, with scared eyes.

"W'y, sure! Why not?"

"Well, I might as well tell you, Win—she and I had a falling out. I was trying to escape when those Mexicans caught me, and it was all over Mr. Deal. He kept me shut up, so I couldn't get away and—and I didn't like his ways."

"He was too familiar, eh?"

"Yes! On short acquaintance, as they say. And I could see that poor mother was afraid."

"He's a bad actor," stated Irons. "A man that will stop at nothing. Your father is kind of stingy and talks too much, but anyhow you know he loves you."

"Yes, I do," she breathed. "Poor father, how it must have worried him! I mean when I ran away and he found that they had me in their power."

"Pony Deal sent Buff notice to let him ship those stolen cattle or—well, he'd never see you again. And Captain Ross was getting ready to ride in after you when I escaped and turned him back."

"Why Win! Is Mr. Deal as bad as that?"

"You'd think so, Anitra, if you knew what I know. But your mother rode clear down to Escondido to tell me it was Fausto that had caught you."

"It's terrible!" sighed Anitra. "The way Deal rules over her. And yet she seems to love him. She seems kind of fascinated by him—but I can see he's a lawless man."

"He's dangerous!" warned Win. "Look out for him. When he found you were gone he rode down with all his rustlers to take you away from your father. But when he found what had really happened he showed what was in his mind. He offered that Mexican Colonel to buy all his cattle if he'd give you back to *him.*"

"Uhhr!" she shivered, and turned her face away.

"Let's talk about something else."

"You're cold," he soothed, holding her close. "But you're all right, now I'll protect you. You're all tired out—but when you're back at Escondido, strong and happy again—"

"You'll ask me to marry you?" she ended.

"And go away," he added. "Where no one will ever find us. You're too sweet — too beautiful — Anitra. I'm afraid—"

"Who's that?" she whispered.

Across the river, leading a horse and riding fast, Buster McCann came spurring down to the ford.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Buster Gets Another Horse

"ALL RIGHT!" he waved as he plunged into the stream. "You can put out that fire, Win." Then as he splashed up on the bank he added. "Bunch of Mexicans after me, I reckon."

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Winchester kicked out the flame and ran to meet him. "Buster!" he cried, pulling him down off his horse. "We sure thought you were done for. Did you get him?"

"Shore thing!" laughed McCann, waving his hand at the sorrel. "Ain't he the finest-looking hawse you ever saw?"

"No, no!" corrected Irons. "I mean Fausto Parral."

"W'y—w'y *yes!*" shrilled Buster. "What did you think?" But when he went out of the saddle it skeered the hawse, and I tuk after him up the river. There was Mexicans everywhere—and lots of soldiers—and, jest as I roped him, they unhooked with everything they had. I knocked over a couple of them gitting away; but look at him—ain't he a peach?"

He paused to gaze admiringly at the snorting sorrel, who kept at the end of his rope.

"Brand's TRS connected," he said. "That's old Terrazas' iron."

"A fine horse!" pronounced Win, smiling back at Anitra. "But what's the matter with Blackie?"

He patted the blowing black on the neck, and Buster looked away.

"Well, he's all right," he admitted. "A big, strong hawse—take you anywhere. But they's something about this sorrel—I know it will make Blackie sore—but somehow I jest love that hawse. Goin' to change my saddle, right now."

He handed Win the rope but, before he could make the change, Anitra came and stood beside him.

"What is it you like about him?"

"Well—well, ma'am," he stammered. "He's beautiful. Look at the line of his neck—and them laigs. Some men are strong for women—something pretty, to have around—but—"

"I—I see," she murmured, looking down; and Winchester came to her aid.

"Where you going in a such a hurry?" he demanded brusquely. "Sit down, and let's have a little talk."

"Nope, nope," replied McCann. "I've got to be drifting. If them Mexicans ever see me riding off on Peludo's hawse—"

"Well, get behind this bank, then," suggested Win. "You're not leaving the country, are you?"

"Yep. Travelling for my health," grinned Buster. "I hope you and Miss Anitra do all right."

"We will," nodded Irons. "But before you go, Buster—"

"We want to thank you," cut in Anitra. "You don't know how happy you've made us. And how much I admire you, Buster. I just know you got captured on purpose, in order to help me out."

"Well—yes," he admitted. "I did. Had to git where I could work on them Mexicans. And then"—he laughed—"I rung old Win in on it. Sending that kid down for him, and all."

"Buster," said Winchester, "I want to thank you again for giving me a chance at them, anyway. But they got me in the door, the first thing. I let them catch me like a fool-quail."

"You put up a good talk, with that ring around your neck, but I happened to be holding the cards. I jest done for you what you done for me, that other time. Well, good-bye, Win, and good luck."

BUSTER put out his big hand—and, as Irons took it, McCann stood laughing.

"You thought I was a rustler, didn't you?" he accused. "That time when I come into the Basin. Well, I jest want to tell you I was nothing of the kind. I was under-cover agent for Ross."

"No!" exclaimed Winchester, his eyes lighting up as he squeezed his old friends hand. "Why, of course, I might have known it!"

"Shore!" agreed McCann. "But I see you didn't so I thought I'd better explain. And I wanted Miss Anitra"—he bowed awkwardly—"to know I was on the square. I never did like the name of a thief—"

"Oh, Buster!" she cried, seizing his other hand. "I just knew you were honest, all the time. There's something about your face—"

"Yeah!" he grinned, rubbing his ten days beard; and turned to mount his horse.

"No—wait!" she commanded. "Oh, may I, Win?"

Without waiting for his answer she pulled down Buster's head and gave him a tremulous kiss.

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"I hope you'll be happy, too," she said; and a tear ran down his cheek.

"Yes'm," he blinked, swinging up on his horse.

"Isn't he going to look back?" she asked at last; and Don Rifle shook his head.

"No, dear," he said. "That isn't his way. But I'm glad you gave him the kiss."

CHAPTER XXXIX

"Two Eyes!"

ALL night Winchester Irons and Anitra Hall had been riding for the Rio Grande. Now she lay asleep at Comanche Crossing while he made smoke signals to show she was safe. But still the Texas cowboys, the cavalry and Texas Rangers, kept on in their impetuous search. He could see their dust as they raced past Fronteras, the stronghold of Fausto Parral, harrying his bandits into the Sierras; but Fausto himself lay dead just across the river in Mexico.

It had been a mad day of riding and fighting and a wilder night of flight; and still as Irons watched the ancient fortress he called down curses on Fronteras. It was a nest of vipers, a hide-out for border outlaws, the rendezvous of Mexicans who lived by robbery and murder; but never had they dared kidnap a white woman and they had a hereafter coming to them. Once before Win Irons had burned their hold-out to the ground. Now he swore never to rest while one adobe lay on another.

His fires burned low as he sat watching the distant pursuit, and not a man turned back—until at last an answer came. From the high ridge behind Fronteras two smoke-columns showed against the sky, and he threw on green brush to guide the Rangers in. They rode with scouts out in front, two flankers on the sides, and a rear guard in charge of the packs, and as they swung down towards Comanche Crossing the advance guards halted and dismounted. Irons stood out on the point and waved them across, but Captain Ross beat them in.

"Well?" he demanded; and Winchester jerked his thumb towards the fire.

"Is she—is she all right?" faltered the Captain; and every man waited on his answer. They had expected to find her somewhere but—

"O.K.," nodded Win. "She's asleep."

Anitra lay on a saddle blanket, her golden hair tumbled, her sweet face drawn with pain—too exhausted to open her eyes.

"All right?" repeated Ross, incredulously.

"I got there in time," stated Don Rifle; but his stern lips did not smile.

"Thank God!" observed the Captain, wiping the sweat from his eyes; and the Rangers began to mutter among themselves.

"Who's that dead Mex back there?" inquired a scout, at last; and once more they waited on his words.

"Fausto Parral!" answered Win. "Buster killed him, just before we crossed."

"Yes?" challenged Sergeant Miles, and glanced inquiringly at Captain Ross.

"Go back and look him over!" ordered the Captain. "Irons—where did you find her? And how?"

"Back at old Fronteras," reported Winchester, as though he were still a sergeant. "Buster sent me word by a Mexican kid and *he* led to where she was. But the kid double-crossed me and when he knocked on Fausto' door—well, they took me prisoner, that's all. Had me strapped in the old garotte and were starting to break my neck when some of Villa's soldiers rode in. Parral went out to see them and Buster broke in the back way and turned me loose. We slipped out then, taking Anitra with us, and—that's all. We escaped."

"And what about Fausto Parral?"

"HE followed us till daylight and, just at the edge of the river-bottom, Buster stepped off and let him have it. That's his body you saw back there."

"Good!" nodded Ross, but with no particular enthusiasm; and glanced across the river after Miles. "Have any trouble with the Mexican soldiers?"

"Not a bit!" grinned Don Rifle. "In fact, they saved my life. Parral was just starting to garotte me when they rode in and demanded a drink. It seems he'd invited them to dance at his wedding; but

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they'd come a little early—for the drinks. Then Buster kicked in the back door, and we were gone before Fausto got back."

"But he was going to kill you, eh?" interrogated Captain Ross.

"Well—maybe," shrugged Winchester. "You never can tell."

"Tell what?" demanded the Captain, beckoning him off to one side. "Now what's this you're holding out?"

"Oh, well," evaded Irons, "why go into details? Buster and I got her back, and you saw what happened to Fausto."

"I want to know the truth," stated Ross. "Was he threatening to kill you unless Anitra—"

"Yes," admitted Winchester. "He was."

"I thought so," nodded the Captain. "How do you know it was him you shot?"

"Why, Buster recognized him by that bright sorrel he was riding when he tried to cut us off at the crossing. But—"

"But you never went back to view the body?"

"No. The sorrel ran away—and Buster was so crazy to get him he chased him up the river several miles."

"I reckon you know," observed Ross, smiling grimly, "that Fausto had only one eye. Well, I didn't stop, myself, but looking down as I rode past—"

He sighed and glanced back as Sergeant Miles rode up.

"Two eyes!" he reported. "It isn't him."

CHAPTER XL

"Half An Ear!"

"TWO eyes!" cried Don Rifle, hardly believing his ears. "Doesn't he *look* like Fausto Parral? He was riding Fausto's horse, and Buster knew him well. I believe there's some mistake."

"I wonder," suggested Ross, "if he's had two good eyes all the time. This is the second time he's been reported dead—maybe that eye-flap was only a disguise."

"I wouldn't put it past him," muttered Irons. "Ever hear how that eye got put out?"

"Never did," confessed the Captain. "I've been after him for fifteen years—and right on his tail a dozen times—and he's always had on that white patch."

"He didn't need to use a white one," mused Win. "That's something you could see a mile. And since he's grown that big beard it's about all you could tell him by—I noticed that, when he had me on the garotte. This is serious, Captain, and you know why. Anitra thinks he's been killed and she's sleeping like a child, but if anybody tells her we got the wrong man—"

"She'll always be afraid," nodded the Captain. "I'll look at that body, myself."

"And look at his ears," called Irons. "Somebody told me that the reason he wore his hair long was to cover up one that was cut half off."

"Might have lost it in a knife fight," observed Ross. "I declare I'm right put out. This has been a terrible fright—I feel ten years older—but when you told me that Fausto was dead—Well, maybe it *is* him. I'll look."

He rode away hopefully and Don Rifle sighed. He had felt so sure that—after all their wild riding, their ambushes and night attacks—they had laid the crafty bandit on his back. In his rage to get back Anitra before she crossed the Rio Grande Fausto had dashed in and stopped a bullet. It was not like the old Parral to expose himself so openly—but this was not the old Fausto. The Fox of Fronteras had forgotten his cunning in a last, desperate dash to seize her. To snatch her back before she gained the protection of Rangers, cowboys, soldiers.

What a battle he had put up in those long years of fighting, of raids into Texas and flights into the interior to escape the Rangers' wrath. And he had always got away. Even when they had surrounded Fonteras and rushed his stronghold he had plunged into the river without a moment's hesitation and escaped by playing dead. Escaped the bullets of as good a man as Captain Ross. And now, well, the Captain would know.

Don Rifle became aware of a movemen by the fire and Anitra rose up, blinking.

"Why—what is it?" she asked, seeing the Rangers all about; and Win sat down by her, smiling.

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"The Rangers have come," he said. "So now you are perfectly safe."

"Oh!" she nodded, trying to smile as they gazed at her.

"But where's the Captain?" she demanded.

"He's all right," evaded Win. "Across the river for something."

"Has he gone to view the body?" she whispered. "I heard what you said when he left."

"Yes," he answered. "It's the duty of the Rangers to get a description of every man that is killed. A Mexican told me once that Parral had a bum ear and wore his hair right long to hide it. But say—here comes some coffee that the Rangers have made. Much obliged, boys—what's that dust?"

SERGEANT MILES glanced back down the river.

"Buff Hall and his cowboys," he said. "I reckon they saw your smoke."

"Yeah!" grinned Irons. "What about Troop A?"

"Still chasing 'em," laughed back Miles. "These soldiers are hard to head, once they get the order to cross. Probably never looked back at all."

"Oh, isn't that dear of them!" exclaimed Anitra. "How can I ever thank you enough!"

Her eyes filled with tears as she glanced up at the gallant sergeant, and he blushed as he turned away.

"Don't mention it, Miss Anitra," he mumbled and hurried back to his men.

She washed in the water Win brought, drank deep of the Rangers strong coffee and started to comb out her hair.

"Poor Win!" she said. "You look so tired. And how can I ever thank *you?*"

"You don't need to!" he responded grimly. "I didn't do a thing. It was Buster McCann that got us out."

"But you *tried,* Win! You did your your best."

"Yeah!" he admitted; and she followed his eyes as he watched Captain Ross coming back. He was riding straight up, his beard whipped by the wind, his broad shoulders squarely set; but whether his news was good or ill was more than they could tell. And yet it meant so much to them both.

"Well?" demanded Irons impatiently as his old Captain paused to smile at Anitra; but Ross did not choose to answer.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, stepping down by the fire and gazing at her admiringly. "And how's my Little Sweetheart this morning?"

"Fine and dandy!" she said, giving him a kiss. "You don't need to be mysterious—I heard you!"

"Heard me what?" he demanded bluffly.

"Heard you and Win talking about that body over there. Was it—him? Or somebody else?"

"I was saving that for a surprise!" he answered, beaming. "Yes, Anitra, it was him!"

"How do you know?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Well," he said, glancing at Win. "Half his right ear was cut off."

CHAPTER XLI

"DON'T SMILE!"

"SAY, listen!" charged Don Rifle when he got the Captain by himself, "when you tell me it was him—*don't smile!*"

"All right," answered Ross. "It was Fausto Parral. Sure as shooting—that ear was *gone.* And if it hadn't been, Win, I'd've told you so, anyway. Did you see how happy it made her?"

"Sure!" nodded Irons. "But I need to know the truth. Because if that wasn't Fausto I'm going across and get him. Before he comes back and gets *her!*"

"Well, look out for her," warned Ross. "You can't be too careful. Lots of these knife-throwing Mexicans have got half an ear gone. He don't look quite right without a patch over one eye, but I believe that was only a blind. I just wonder how many times I've chased some other Mex, while old Fausto was getting away. In a fight that's about all you'd see, and it explains a lot of things."

"Yes," agreed Winchester, still looking at him hard. "Well, all right—I'm glad he's gone. Now what about these Villa deserters that are scattered all over the country?"

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"They broke for the hills when Troop A started across, and they've been going ever since. My guess is they'll all turn bandit. The Carranzistas have got Villa on the run, and it's about time for another change."

"All right," shrugged Irons, "I'll take her away then."

"As far as you can," nodded the Captain. But they did not reckon on her father.

Buffington Hall came splashing across the river—a huge, red-faced man—and clasped his daughter to his heart. She had run away from him, to join her mother in Maverick Basin, but now she was safe, back home. He wept and kissed her and took her home to Escondido, his border castle, without even a by-your-leave to Don Rifle. Of course he had saved her—with the aid of Buster McCann—but with Buff the past was soon forgotten.

In the white house on the hill above Smugglers' Crossing she climbed up into her watch-tower to look, and Win was not far away. It had been a long ordeal for both of them, the month during which she had been a prisoner, and he kissed her and held her close.

"It's a rough country," he sighed as they gazed down at the gleaming river and Double Adobes, on the Mexican side. Half the garrison had fled to the hills as Troop A of the cavalry charged across, but the skull and cross-bones flag still flapped in the wind and a sentry stood guard by the door. That flag was blood red and the solders that flew it called themselves the Troop of Death. No one crossed at the ford, either way. They were waiting, but for what no one knew.

"It's so still now," she said. "All our soldiers are gone, and yet I feel perfectly safe. Dear old Escondido—I used to feel shut in here. Now I realize what a protection it is."

"Yes, it's safe," he admitted. "But it isn't the walls. It's the soldiers, the Rangers and all these Texas cowboys, ready to fight at the drop of a hat. They worship you, Anitra—women being so scarce. I reckon the Mexicans have learned their lesson."

"Yes," she smiled. "And, now you speak of it, I do feel sort of raised on a pedestal. But I like it—it makes me feel so kind of glorified. As if I really were a golden-haired angel and they were the guards at the gate. And how happy Father was when he knew I was safe again! I'm going to stay right here, and help him."

"ALL right," he agreed. "I'll stick around, too, and keep these rustlers from stealing him blind. We've got a worse bunch on the Texas side than down across the Line."

"You're dead right!" bellowed a big voice from down below and Buffington Hall came stamping up the stairs.

"Yes, sir!" he declared. "I'd rather have a Mexican Revolution on my hands, any day, than Pony Deal and his gang. You know where that rascal is, right now? Across there with Colonel Aguilar, calmly making a deal to steal my cattle!"

He stabbed a blunt forefinger towards Double Adobes and Winchester raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I seen him!" stated Hall. "You know how I spotted him? That bandy-legged cowboy, Storms, sneaking by and looking up for Anitra! You never seen one without the other is close—they came down from Maverick Basin, this mawning!"

"Is he around here now?" demanded Irons; but Anitra pushed him back in his chair.

"Never mind, dear," she said. "Haven't we had enough fighting? And Bandy can't hurt us, up here."

"That warty little toad!" grumbled Win. "I've got to keep an eye out for him. Because the first time he gets a chance—"

"He'll kill you!" nodded Buff. "I know it."

"Oh, no he wont!" protested Anitra. "Did you hear that bugle, just now? I believe it's Troop A, coming back."

"No, no!" burst out her father, jumping up to look. "Well, dog my cats, if it ain't *another* troop, coming down from Presidio to protect us!"

"You're going to be well protected," grinned Irons. "There's another troop, behind that."

"And another one!" cried Anitra. "I can see their guidons. Oh, I wonder if the United States has declared war!"

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CHAPTER XLII

Protection For American Citizens

BUFF HALL went down the stairs three steps at a time and galloped up to meet the troops. He had demanded protection—perhaps a little too forcibly—and here was a whole squadron of cavalry. And all on account of his daughter, who already had been brought back home. Colonel Ogilvie would be disappointed, for he was a Southern fire-eater who twice before had crossed the Line. Not under orders—the Secretary of War was a Pacifist—but to protect the lives and property of American citizens. That was orders enough for him.

He rode in proudly at the head of his troops, while the Mexicans gazed across in dismay; but they lined up and stood their ground. To them the soil of Mexico was sacred and they were ready to defend it with their lives. But the *causus belli* —the American girl who had been kidnapped—was safe in her father's house and Ogilvie had to swallow his ire. To the Mexican colonel across the river he gave a soldierly salute and ordered his troopers to make camp.

"I cannot but admire the spirit of these men," he confessed as he turned back with Hall. "But where the lives of American citizens are concerned—who was it that brought her back? Winchester Irons? I must see him, and get a full report."

He listened gravely as Don Rifle told about Anitra, his black eyes gleaming as he heard of the bandits invading Texas to carry her off.

"That is something," he said, "that we must stop. Where is this Fausto Parral?"

"He's dead," stated Win, succinctly. "Buster killed him at Comanche Crossing."

"Buster McCann? Let me see this man!"

"I'm sorry," said Irons. "He headed north after the shooting and we haven't seen him since."

"Was he running away, Mr. Irons?"

"Well—yes. He killed a couple of soldiers—"

"Mexican soldiers? In self defense, of course. But I'm surprised he ran away."

"Well," confessed Winchester, "he was riding Fausto's horse—"

"So!" broke in the Colonel, and frowned. "Tell me some more about McCann—do you think I could hire him as a scout?"

"Very likely, if you could find him. And would let him keep the horse."

"*Here's* a man," broke in Hall, slapping Irons on the shoulder, "that's the best damned scout in the country—and he never drinks a drop. Been a sergeant in the Rangers, and I don't mind telling you he's worked on both sides of the Line. Ever heerd about the battle of Fronteras? He took the town with ten men."

A PAINED look swept across the stern countenance of Ogilvie and he looked at Winchester again.

"Oh, well," he said. "You probably had your reasons. I'd like to ask your opinion, Mr. Irons. Are there going to be more of these raids into Texas? Enough to justify me in keeping my men here?"

"Yes, sir!" answered Don Rifle. "Lots of them. Half the soldiers across the river have deserted with their arms, and most of them will turn bandit. In fact, they were bandits before they enlisted with Villa. It runs in the blood down here."

"Hmm. You have a very poor opinion of Mexicans. What action would you suggest to stop them?"

"I'd surround Fronteras and kill every man in town. Then I'd level it to the ground with dynamite. As long as it stands, it will be headquarters for these bandits. They're the fourth generation of inbred *ladrones*—all they live by is murder and robbery."

"You're rather extreme," observed the Colonel at last. "So you know that country well?"

"Like the palm of my hand," nodded Don Rifle. "But I've promised to keep out of Mexico, so you'll have to get some other scout."

"And whom would you suggest?" inquired Obilvie, suavely.

"Well, Buster McCann," answered Win. "He not only knows the country but he speaks *pelado* Mexican. Only I

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don't know where he is now."

"You could find him, I imagine," remarked the Colonel, "if you're half as good as Mr. Hall suggests."

"Well—yes," admitted Irons. "Up in Maverick Basin, the place where Anitra was kidnapped."

"Then suppose I engage you as Government Scout and send you to bring him in?"

"With how many soldiers?" butted in Hall, giving Win a jab in the ribs.

"Why, as many as you please," replied Ogilvie. "Do I understand the country is dangerous?"

"It's the damnest nest of outlaws in Texas," exploded Buff. "And they're all in cahoots with these Villistas. The Mexicans steal the cattle and sell them to Pony Deal and he passes them on to the railroad. And it was right at his house my daughter was kidnapped. Carried away by this bandit, Parral."

"I see!" nodded Ogilvie. "It is all very simple then. I will send Lieutenant Woolwine to investigate the kidnapping and Mr. Irons shall be his guide."

"That's the talk!" applauded Hall, ignoring the amenities; and with a very unmilitary salute he hurried Irons away.

CHAPTER XLIII

The Chance of a Lifetime

"HERE'S the chance of a lifetime," chuckled Buffington Hall, "to clean up on them Maverick Basin rustlers. They won't dare to resist the United States Army—and won't that woman of Pony's squeal? She may be Anitra's mother but she's responsible for her kidnapping! You might tell the Lieutenant that."

"Well—maybe," shrugged Irons. "I'll sure read every brand in the Basin and tell him those cows are stolen. If we can break up this traffic in wet cattle—"

"That's the boy!" praised Hall and with a pat on the back he hurried off, laughing to himself. No small part of his delight was in imagining the chagrin of the woman who had once been his wife. She was living with Pony now, the wife of an outlaw—no fit woman to mother his child. Yet always she was scheming to steal Anitra away from him—and Pony Deal would do anything. Anything! He had stolen one woman—why not another? He would steal Anitra if he could.

Pony was not at Maverick Basin when the detachment rode in and halted before the Stone House. Bandy Storms, his Man Friday, stepped out on the porch and ducked back at sight of Irons. Then Mrs. Deal herself appeared, and she gave Win a quick look of hate.

"Well!" she challenged, gazing angrily about, "what's the meaning of all these troops? If you are looking for Mr. Deal he's across the river in Mexico and—"

"Mrs. Deal," broke in Winchester, "this is Lieutenant Woolwine. He's come up to investigate this kidnapping."

Always before, when Irons had seen her, Mrs. Deal had been subtly appealing—a beautiful woman, apparently a good woman, forced by circumstances beyond her control to live in the midst of outlaws. Now, under stress, he saw another side of her nature. She was defiant, dominating, hard.

"Investigate it!" she repeated. "The kidnapping of my daughter? Well, I hope you don't think—"

"Don't talk to me," broke in Win. "I'm only a Government Scout."

"You're behind it!" she declared, almost weeping with rage. "And Buffington Hall is behind *you!*"

"No, madam," spoke up the Lieutenant, cutting her short, "I am acting under orders from Colonel Ogilvie, who must make a report to the Government. Your daughter, an American citizen, was kidnapped and carried off into Mexico—"

"Oh! Is that what you want?" she said; and instantly her manner changed. "I hope you'll excuse me," she began; but Irons was on his way. He felt a sort of shame for the mother of his betrothed—and he had seen a horse that he knew. A big, black horse with a Roman nose and one notched ear. Buster's horse—he would know him anywhere.

"Where's the owner of that horse?" he demanded of Bandy Storms; and Man Friday forgot his grouch.

"That's Buster's horse," he explained.

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"He left him when he started for Mexico."

"Mexico!" repeated Win, incredulously; and then he turned on Bandy. "Listen," he said, "you bow-legged little runt! I happen to know that Buster is *right here*. And I want to see him—understand!"

"WELL, what do you want of him?" demanded Storms.

"None of your business!" retorted Winchester. "But if you've killed old Buster or—"

"Say! Listen yourself!" came back Bandy. "And don't be so damned swelled up! Just because you're a Government Scout! Buster headed for Mexico this morning!"

"And left old Blackie? Ump-um!"

"Had to do it—he wouldn't lead. And Buster was so stuck on Alazan he wouldn't ride no hawse else."

"Well I'll be damned," muttered Irons; and Storms regarded him with a crooked smile.

"You think you're hell, don't you?" he taunted. "Coming up here with soldiers, and all that! Let me tell you, Mister—you don't know nothing! That's a Terrazas hawse that Buster is riding and Don Luis is trying to git him back. He's the Governor's favorite mount—and stolen stock, to boot. Bunch of officers have been chasing Buster everywhere."

"But I thought," objected Win, "the old Governor promised Villa he wouldn't claim any of his stuff. Not while young Luis is in Chihuahua Penitentiary with a rope hanging over his head."

"Old stuff!" pronounced Storms. "You're away behind the times. Young Luis escaped last week and the Old Man is claiming everything. Everything in his iron—and that sorrel of Buster's has got TRS on his hip."

"So?" inquired Irons, and then he thought up a come-back. "Well, in that case," he said, "no wonder you folks are spooky. There's a thousand Terrazas cows, right here in your pasture! And ten thousand burnt-over Hog Eyes!"

"Uhr!" grunted Storms, for the Hog Eye was Buffington Hall's brand. "I thought you'd git around to it. You're up here spying on our cattle."

"Well, I haven't got any patch over my eye, like your old friend and fellow-cowthief, Fausto Parral! How come *he* was here, to steal Anitra Hall? He was delivering wet cattle, and you know it!"

"He was naht!" denied Bandy in a tantrum; and then he stepped around behind the barn.

"Let him go," said Win as they heard a clatter of fleeing hoofs. And he turned to find Woolwine behind him.

CHAPTER XLIV

For the Love of Alazan

THE investigation was soon over and the Lieutenant was looking wise as he rode out of Maverick Basin. He had discovered—by overhearing it—what was behind all this fighting which had kept the Big Bend in a tumult. A rustlers' war, with all the trimmings—stolen cattle, smuggled across—illicit trading, altered brands—even the kidnapping of a rich man's daughter. The same cattleman, in fact, who had demanded so much protection—until he had four troops of cavalry. More than that, he had discovered that Pony Deal, right then, was across the river in Mexico.

Don Rifle had discovered something too. Deal was shipping his cattle out. The burned-over brands were healing and in the wide pastures near the Stone House, not half the stolen stock remained. Somewhere, somehow, Pony had found a way out not covered by the brand inspectors. Or, if covered, not too closely watched. And Buster McCann, like a man with two girls, was having trouble with Blackie and Alazan.

He loved them both, but the glossy sorrel had held his eye from the first. Alazan was more than a sorrel—he was of royal blood, a golden *palomillo*, the pet of the Governor of a State. There was something about his eyes, the stately poise of his head, the lines of his back and legs, that set him apart from the rest. He was a creature so precious that men had fought and died to save him, while other men had killed for his sake. To win him Buster had shot down three men and now he was hiding out.

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Winchester scanned the high places as they rode down the canyon, for he knew where McCann would be. Out on some point, where he could watch their coming and going. He must have seen them from far up on the rim.

"I believe," Win said to the Lieutenant, "I'll look out this upper trail."

He let the soldiers ride on while he took a well-worn path that had fresh horse-tracks on it—tracks small and round with a certain trimness about them—and at a turn he met Buster, coming down.

"Hello!" greeted the rider of beauteous Alazan, hitching up his slouchy bib-overalls; and his big voice was hushed with fear.

"Who's all these soldiers?" he demanded. "Did they send them out after me?"

"No. They've been investigating this kidnapping case. I'm the man that's looking for you."

"Yes?" observed Buster, still dubious.

"How'd you like a job as a Government Scout? Colonel Ogilvie says he can use you."

"On which side of the river, Win?"

"Both sides—wherever you're sent."

"Nope," sighed McCann. "Don't dare to cross, now. Those rascals all know this hawse."

"Well, ride old Blackie and leave Alazan in camp. I saw him back at the House and the poor old boy was lonely. He whickered his head off when he saw me."

"Shore takes it hard," shrugged Buster. "And Alazan! Blackie jest hates him. He's always been my *chulo*-hawse; and now, of course, I ride this one."

HE patted Alazan on the shoulder, but the amber-like eyes never changed. Perhaps, like some much-sought woman, he had learned not to notice such things.

"I was telling the Colonel about you," said Win, "and he ordered me to bring you in. In fact, you're the man we came looking for. That investigation was only a bluff."

"Yeah?" inquired McCann. "What does he want to see me for? Reckon he's trying to git my hawse?"

"No, no!" laughed Irons. "He just wants to talk with you and get your opinion of these Mexicans. Are they going to quiet down or start another revolution? That's what he's trying to find out."

"Well, you jest tell your Colonel they're hostile as hell and liable to start something, any time. Every place I went some yaller-belly tried to kill me—and Fronteras is packed full of bad Mexicans."

"Suppose you come down and tell him that, yourself. You're quite a hero, Buster, and the Colonel wants to see you. Anitra would like to see you, too."

"Aw-w," grumbled Buster, turning red and looking away. "Well, all right, what's the difference? I don't care *what* happens to me, anyway."

"What you need," advised Win, leading off, "is a little good society—and a shirt. They've got some big men in the army—I believe you could get a fit."

"Think so?" inquired McCann, looking up. "Well, come on then—hit the trail. Seems like, all my life, I've been riding good hawses and wearing some raggedy old shirt. And then, every time I git a new one I tear it all to hell in the brush. Do you reckon, Win, if I joined the Scouts, the Colonel would take care of my hawse?"

"Like his very own!" promised Winchester; and so he brought Buster in.

CHAPTER XLV

The Champion Horse-Thief of Texas

THERE were big doings that night at Escondido and Buster turned back to camp with a sigh. He had gazed once more upon the beauty of Anitra and he passed Alazan without saying a word. But when, in the morning, he found his horse gone there was hell all down the line. He inquired of the sentry and the quartermaster sergeant if somebody had greased their paws, and of the Adjutant and the Colonel whether this was the Army or some boys on a practice hike. And if some Mexican could sneak in and lead off a hawse what would keep him from cutting a man's throat?

These were questions easier asked than answered and Colonel Ogilvie began an

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inquiry, but before he had finished it his scout was gone—and nobody had seen him go, either. Win found his tracks, going down towards the river, and he was leading some other man's horse. Then for two days, nothing was heard of Buster McCann until a Mexican beckoned Don Rifle into the brush.

Not having a *centavo* to buy a *cigarro* he had thought the *señor* might oblige, and with a thousand thanks he had a little information which might be worth a dollar or two. The big Americans called No Clothes was shut up in San Miguel and, so it was said, the Villista deserters were trying out different ways of killing him.

There were bugle calls then and two troops of cavalry made a dash for Comanche Ford, leaving two more to face Colonel Aguilar and his garrison of sullen Villistas. But, like it or not, the Rio Grande was crossed and Ogilvie led the raid into Mexico. They surrounded San Miguel—while startled Mexicans, riding bareback, fled before them toward Fronteras—and behind a white flag the Colonel sent in a demand that the Americans be surrendered, forthwith. Otherwise he would reduce the town to ruins and kill every male that could walk.

This was strong talk, but he meant business, and the *presidente* came out for a conference. He was unable to understand why his peaceful *lugar* should be surrounded in this threatening manner, since they were all good citizens and adherents of Pancho Villa, who would take this very ill. But since they chose to ride in and demand the *Americano,* who in all ways was their friend, he would bring him out and let them judge for themselves whether in any way he had been abused. With these few words he flagged the Mexicans behind and they brought out Pony Deal.

"*Pony Deal!* Irons knew him by the horse he rode and a certain swaggering ease. He was flashily dressed, puffing a black cigarette; and he looked them over, saying nothing. It came over Win that Pony's errand below the Line would not bear too close a scrutiny, but the Colonel was so astounded by his appearance that he could only sit his horse and stare.

"Here is the *Americano!*" stated the *presidente,* smiling maliciously; and retired into town on the lope.

As for Pony Deal, he was badly scared and gave Winchester a poisonous look; but, being a professional gambler, he kept his face straight and waited for something to break. If they had come for *him*—

"Well, what will it be?" he inquired; and Ogilvie turned to Don Rifle.

"Who is this man?" he demanded; and Irons answered with an edge of scorn.

"Pony Deal, the wealthy cattleman from Maverick Basin!" he replied.

"The man at whose ranch—?"

"The same," nodded Win. "You will remember he was reported in Mexico."

"WHAT are you doing here, Mr. Deal?" rapped out the Colonel, who found himself in a bad way. He had invaded a friendly country to save the life of his Scout, and now the Mexicans gave up *him.* This spick-and-span gambler with the tight pants and diamond horseshoe, who nevertheless seemed to have something on his mind.

"Well," hedged Deal, "making a call on an old friend."

"For what purpose? Don't you know the Border is closed and every American marked for death?"

"Not me!" retorted Pony boldly. "I'm as safe here as I am at home. But, since you ask me, I'll explain. These Mexicans have got the idea they can play poker. I'm down here to show them they can't!"

He smiled and Ogilvie smiled with him; but Don Rifle's face never changed. He knew Pony Deal, and how slick he could be; but the life of Buster was at stake and Win knew that Pony was lying. Or covering up until he could find out what was going on—then he would play a leading hand.

"Where's Buster?" he broke in rapidly; and Deal blinked and looked away.

"They had him in jail a while ago," he mumbled. "But he up and got away."

"Jail!" repeated the Colonel. "We'll look into this. That man was a Government Scout."

"No!" exclaimed Deal, incredulously; and his eyes dilated with a new fear. But he was game—the next moment he was laughing.

"Buster?" he grinned. "W'y he's the

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champeen hawse-thief of Texas! And drunk? He's drunk all the time! He came in two days ago and raised so much hell they had to put him in jail. But when they looked for him this morning he was *gone!*

Ogilvie glanced at Don Rifle, who shook his head.

"I'd like to search this jail," he said.

CHAPTER XLVI

The American Prisoner

OF the several ways of calling a man a liar Winchester Irons had chosen the least offensive, but Pony Deal flushed and blinked hard.

"All right," he said, "go and search, and be damned to you! So you think I'm lying, hey?"

"I think," returned Don Rifle, "that Buster is in that town—unless he's been killed. And in a case like that—"

"Well, dadblast it, don't you know he's my friend?"

"Sure," nodded Win, "that's why I'm surprised that you let him lay in jail."

"Captain Orcutt!" ordered the Colonel. "Go in and search that town—every house. And perhaps," he suggested, "Mr. Deal will accompany you to show where our Scout was last seen?"

"He was seen!" burst out Pony; and stopped short. "Never mind," he sulked. "Go ahead and look for him—I ain't used to being called a liar."

"You're my prisoner," came back Ogilvie, "until this matter has been cleared up. Mr. Irons, you may go, too." Still flying a white flag, the soldiers searched every house while the Mexicans hid for their lives. They remembered Don Rifle and his raid on Fronteras—but Buster could not be found. No one would talk—they were too scared, for one thing—and at the end Pony Deal smiled, thinly.

"Now who's a liar?" he demanded; and Win looked him in the eye.

"*You* are!" he said. "Trying to protect these bandits. Look what I found in that jail."

He produced two bloody ropes, worn in two against sharp stones, and Ogilvie snatched them away.

"He's escaped!" he exclaimed. "But they were holding him prisoner. Who were those men that were riding towards Fronteras?"

"Fausto Parral's old crowd," chipped in Deal, suddenly helpful. "They skipped when they saw you coming. No use riding after them—they've took to the hills. But I'll tell you what we might do, Colonel. It's a lucky thing for you I happened to be in town—you can take *me* in as your American. Otherwise—" but he did not specify.

Colonel Ogilvie was caught in a very awkward situation, which might call for an official explanation. He had ridden into Mexico to save an American citizen, but Buster McCann had escaped. He had been tortured by bandits, but the Mexicans had fled also.

"Very well," he nodded. "You're my prisoner."

"Prisoner?" repeated Pony; and then he smiled knowingly.

"O.K.," he said, "jest in time to save my roll. These Mexicans are gitting *bravo,* and they never did like for a white man to escape with the pot. It's easy to skin them, but to make a clean gitaway—"

He shrugged, and the Colonel frowned. He had developed a strong dislike for this renegade American, who had so glibly accepted him as an equal. The chief rustler of Maverick Basin, who had stolen Hall's wife and shot another cattleman to keep her. Not a very desirable associate for a Colonel of Cavalry, with a long and honorable record. He turned away, saying nothing, and they rode at a high trot until they had crossed the Line.

"Well, Colonel," spoke up Deal when they had reached Smugglers' Crossing and halted where the Mexicans could see them, "very kind of you to bring me out. Anything I can do in the way of testimony—"

HE winked and held out his hand.

"Good day, sir!" responded Ogilvie, with a mere touch of his glove, and Pony turned on Irons. But before he could speak what was in his mind he saw Anitra, galloping towards them. She was on the moustached pony that Buster had stolen for her, and she rode him like a queen.

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"Well, well!" began Deal; but she brushed past him to Win.

"Did you find him?" she gasped. "Poor Buster!"

"Yes!" spoke up Pony. "He run out of whiskey. And the Mexicans stole his hawse. But he's all right. He escaped safely."

She blushed to the eyes and gazed about her helplessly, while the Colonel turned very grim.

"That will be all, Mr. Deal," he said firmly.

"Yes, sir! And thank you!" bowed Pony; and went right on with his tale. Telling her, in fact, what he had withheld from the rest; edging closer all the time.

"Pretty slick, how they caught him. Stole his hawse on this side and picked him up when he crossed. He put up a fight and they throwed him in jail. Might've killed him, only he got away. Win found the ropes they had tied around his wrists, but he got loose and kicked down the door."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" breathed Anitra. "Come on, Win!" And she seized his hand.

"Jest a moment!" cut in Deal, all smiles. "I wanted to ask you something, Anitra. Your mother has been anxious about you—and I certainly wish to congratulate Win, here, for the heroic rescue he pulled off. Would it be all right, dear, if Helen came down to see you? She can't talk about anything else!"

He paused, and Anitra shrank away from him, hardly daring to meet his eyes. He was so bold in his ways, so brazen in his claim to a relationship hardly justified by the facts—and as he waited he looked around, smiling. But Anitra did not have to answer.

From the edge of the crowd the big voice of Buffington Hall roared out defiance.

"No!" he shouted. "Don't you speak to my daughter! I don't want you around here, at all! And as for that woman that calls herself your wife—"

"You shut up!" warned Deal, suddenly reaching for his gun; and Hall bit his lips, saying nothing.

"That's all!" said the Colonel, waving Pony away; and after a swift look down the river he loped off.

CHAPTER XLVII

"Riding Alazan!"

Up the river Buster McCann came riding hard.

There was blood in his eye—and on his battered face, too—and he flogged his gaunted pony along; and he shouted after Pony Deal hoarsely.

"You-u renegade whelp!" he yelled. "Somebody gimme a gun while I kill 'im."

"Take mine!" suggested Win, slipping a rifle into his hand while he gave him a hearty hug; but Colonel Ogilvie shook his head.

"We've had trouble enough, McCann," he said. "I'd like to hear your report."

"That tin-horn sport tried to git me killed while they had me in jail at San Miguel. Somebody had told him I was an under-cover agent—and guess who I found him talking with? Fausto Parral! Come back to life again! Can you beat that? With a patch over one eye!"

"What?" demanded Irons, laying hold of him.

"That feller I killed was his *brother!*" explained Buster, "and they set out to give me the works! Gawd, how they beat me and hung me up by the thumbs and got out the old garotte."

"Has anybody got a bottle?" inquired Win. "Here, take a big one—you need it!"

"Ahhr!" shuddered McCann, rolling his eyes as he finished; and then he spied Anitra.

"Oh, hell!" he wailed, slomping down on Irons shoulder, "and I had to bawl it out before her."

"You're all in," soothed Winchester, "come on down to my tent." But Colonel Ogilvie saw otherwise.

"Come down to *my* tent!" he ordered; and as Buster stretched out he sighed.

"I been through hell," he said, while they took down his words. "Fausto Parall is back, organizing all the Mexicans, fixing to cross into Texas on a raid. Fronteras is a full of *ladrones* as a dog is full of fleas—and all hostile, out to kill the Gringos. They sent their boss hawse-thief to steal my Alazan and nabbed me when I crossed the Line after

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him. Then it was nothing but kicks and beating, until Fausto himself showed up. "Hoo!" he moaned and closed his eyes. "They did everything then but kill me."

"At what time did you leave San Miguel?" inquired the Colonel.

"About an hour before daylight. Stole a hawse."

"And was Pony Deal there at the time?"

"There?" cursed Buster. "He was in on it with Fausto! He gave me the hawse-laugh, the haound! Jest wait till I get back my strength and I'll take the hide off'n him!" He trailed off, muttering to himself; and Ogilvie stepped inside.

"Let him sleep," he said; and glanced at Don Rifle.

"Irons," he began, "if I'd known what a rascal Deal is I'd never have let him escape. And as for that *presidente* of San Miguel! But I can't stop to attend to him now!"

He began rattling out orders and, as soon as it was dark, detachments of soldiers rode off through the night to protect the border ranches from attack. Then it came—a point of fire on the peak behind Fonteras; the rush of rockets and the glow of colored lights. It was Fausto Parral's signal for a general raid across the river. At last the scattered bandits had a chief!

FROM the high cliffs up the river another fire made answer; there was a blaze on Chisos Mountain, across in Texas. There were Mexicans everywhere—on both sides of the Line—and at dawn the reports poured in. Ranches had been burned, Americans killed, soldiers attacked; and, over the field telephone, the news of another battle at Presidio del Norte. Pancho Villa himself was defending the town against the forces of General Carranza, and along the whole border there were raids and counter-raids. But Colonel Ogilvie knew his duty.

First and always, to protect American lives and property—but he had not forgotten San Miguel. No, nor bandit-ridden Fronteras, from whence this raid had been launched; nor Fausto Parral, risen up from the dead. Reported killed twice before, he was giving no quarter now; looting ranches a hundred miles above the Line, killing men and bringing out horses.

Across the river at Smugglers' Crossing the Villistas of Aguilar had dug in; but as the day wore on and the fighting increased a dust-cloud rose in the south. Then another army appeared, flying the Mexican eagle, and the red flag of the Troop of Death came down. The Carranzistas—on their way to attack Presidio del Norte—galloped in and opened up with machine-guns; and once more Double Adobes was taken. Aguilar retreated, flying the skull and cross-bones, and no one knew who was fighting which. So most of them deserted and joined the bandits in their campaign of murder and loot.

Spread out in a wide fan, led on by experienced chiefs who had been raiding into Texas for years, they were gathering up cattle and horses by the thousand, driving them back down narrow canyons to the Line.

There was shooting and riding, a hundred false reports; but when at last the big news came Colonel Ogilvie still had his Scouts. Two men who knew Fausto when they saw him—two men who would make no mistake.

"Irons! McCann!" he called. "They have located Parral. He is bringing a band of horses down Quemada Canyon. Wearing his eye-patch and *riding Alazan!*"

"That's him!" cheered Buster, rising up from his sick-bed; and he made a run for his horse.

CHAPTER XLVIII

"Get the Man!"

IT was a scout of Texas Rangers under Sergeant Miles that had located the leader of the raid, and when Winchester and Buster rode up they were watching his dust coming towards them. Leaving the soldiers behind in their rush the Rangers had circled and cut Fausto off. A tall, bearded man with a white patch over his left eye. But there had been many bearded Mexicans with one eye!

Every leader of every band wore an eye-patch to mark him—and to throw

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their pursuers off the trail—but this was Fausto Parral! He was riding the Golden Horse whose fame had spread up and down the Line. Alazan, the favorite mount of Governor Terrazas, the most sought-for horse in North Mexico.

"That's him!" pronounced Buster, after a long look through his glasses. "That's Fausto—and Alazan!"

"Get the man!" ordered Miles. "And let the horse go. That means you, Mr. Government Scout!"

He glanced sharply at McCann, who feigned not to hear him; smiling lovingly as he watched his *chulo*-horse. His pet, his "little monkey," who had never returned his love, passing on from man to man.

"Don't shoot the hawse—that's all I ask!" he said; and Miles jolted him with his elbow.

"Get Fausto!" he answered hoarsely. "Them's our orders—that one man. Keep down, now. Let him come close!"

They were crouched along the rim of a lava-strewn canyon up which the trail wound through the rocks; but as the herd of stolen animals entered the pass Parral and his Golden Horse fell back.

"Let 'em go!" ordered Miles while the Rangers waited, and the herd went pelting past. Good horses, blooded horses, but they were waiting for Fausto—out of sight, without a man showing his head. Parral turned around as if to go and the Rangers held their breath. Then he slowly reined back and trotted up the black defile, his white patch gleaming through the dust.

"Halt!" rapped out Miles; and Fausto saw their guns upon him while the last of his horse-herders fled. He looked up at them with one eye and raised his hands, slowly—cocked his head at a lava-cave and shrugged. They had him—he knew it—but in that instant discipline broke. Two men scrambled down into the canyon—guns ready, but afraid to shoot. They wanted the man—but they wanted the horse more; and the sergeant let them go. It was Joe Heap, a Ranger, and Buster McCann.

"Keep 'em up!" they warned, but Parral never moved. He was waiting. Then he whipped out two shoulder-guns and shot them both down before they could move a hand. He dropped off into the rocks—behind the horse, to protect him—and squirmed like a snake into the cave. Every gun spoke at once, but a little late, and Fausto Parral had disappeared.

Miles was cursing a steady stream as he stumbled down the gulch and landed on the floor of the canyon. They had had Fausto so close they could see the white of his good eye, and then they had let him go. But he was in that black cave and, leaving the dead where they lay, Miles threw a circle around it. Men in front, behind rocks; men thrown out on either side; two more sent up on the rim. It was a volcanic formation and this cave might go in, but in any case they had him safe.

"Now make me some torches out of mezcal-stalks," directed Miles. "Who's game to go in with me after him?"

WIN leapt to the front, jerked up a dead yucca, and heaved it, flaming, inside. A shot answered back, Miles fired at the flash; and then they lay a long time, watching. Fausto had them in the door, against the light of the cave mouth; but was he dead or merely waiting to kill them? Irons lighted another torch, flung it forward like a lance and glided in after it—quick. He lit another and threw it further, revealing a crooked passageway. Another—and their torches were gone. He snatched up the last one and plunged forward recklessly, and ahead there appeared a faint glow of daylight.

"Out and gone, by grab!" shrilled Miles. Fausto had come out on the rim above.

They chased after him, anyway, knowing full well it was useless but to angry to give up at once. And as they looked up the canyon below they saw the Golden Horse trotting off. He held his head sidewise not to step on his bridle-reins, and his tail waved high, like a plume.

"Let him go!" shouted Miles as he saw a Ranger starting after him. "Let him go, you dadburned fool. How many men have got to get killed before you'll learn to *quit*?"

There was a stir in the huddle where the dead men lay, just as Fausto had shot them down, and a bloody head rose up.

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"Don't shoot 'im!" he pleaded. It was Buster.

CHAPTER XLIX

Hell Bent

IT WAS a sorry-looking procession that dragged back to Smugglers' Crossing—with Joe Heap tied up in a blanket and Buster shot in the head. He had escaped the full force of Fausto's slug but it had laid his scalp wide open and put him out of the fight. They were all out of the fight—outwitted and whipped by the one man they had gone to get. Parral had made a clean get-away and crossed into Mexico—and someone had restored his Golden Horse.

He rode past Double Adobes in full sight of the garrison, but the Carranzistas let him go. They were hostile to the Americans. Their machine-guns were trained to cover the crossing, and the distant bandits whooped shrilly. The day had come of which they had long dreamed when—every Mexican a brother—they would gallop into Texas and come back loaded with spoils. The Carranzistas whooped back, the bandits dipped their blood-red flag, and Sergeant Miles summoned Captain Ross.

A Ranger had been killed by Fausto himself—and that alone had marked him for death. It was the unwritten law of the service, and now was the time to strike. While the Rangers' blood was hot and the enemy close at hand — no matter how many there were. They crossed down the river after dark, and Troop A of the Cavalry went with them.

All night San Miguel was ablaze with bon-fires until at last the bandits ran out of wood, but the supply of liquor was unlimited and the returning bandits drank deep. With the garrison of Carranzistas to protect them, they felt no fear of the Americans; yet, towards dawn, Mexican scouts were sent back, for Fausto Parral was in command. He knew—none better—the fury of the Rangers when one of their members was killed. All his brothers had died at their hands. He alone lived on, to match his cunning against the Gringos—and his scouts spotted the Rangers in time.

The town of San Miguel lay in a hollow behind the hills and, where the road led up the canyon, Parrel posted his men and waited. Then, down where the trees grew along the watercourse, he laid a second ambuscade. The Rangers turned to the right and left, as was their custom, for they never entered a defile; but Troop A rode straight on. Eleven of their men had been killed defending a ranch, and they were out for a notable revenge. Their advance guard was almost under the cottonwood trees when the Mexicans rose up and fired.

They fired and they yelled, but the Americans stood their ground, for not a man had been hit. Every fourth soldier held the horses by snaffle-reins, and Captain Latham ordered up the machine-guns. His men had taken cover and were shooting at will, already two Mexicans had been killed, when above the rattle of rifle-shots a machine-gun burst forth and Fausto's bandits hugged the ground. This was more than they had bargained for—the battle was turning against them—and they took shelter behind the cottonwoods.

Then, when all his guns were placed, Captain Latham took one over himself. He opened up with a burst of fire, swung his sights across a tree-trunk, and the cottonwood fell to the ground. Sawed off by a single belt of cartridges, the Mexicans found it falling on their heads. Another gunner sawed down his tree and the bandits of Parral were whipped. That was shooting too fast for them, and seventeen of their men lay dead.

BUT what of the Rangers who had circled the dangerous defile? They fell upon the bandits from above. Every shot that was fired found its mark—those who lived could not run fast enough. They threw away their rifles and galloped off towards Fronteras with both soldiers and Rangers racing after them. There had been a curse on San Miguel—or the bandits had all been drunk—for not a single American had been hit.

Fausto Parral, as usual, was the first to flee, for that was his way of fighting, and the Americans followed with a yell. Down the robbers' trail that led to Fronteras—and the soldiers never stopped. Like hounds long held in leash they

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would not stop for orders—all they knew was to shoot and kill. The Rangers took shelter behind the hills and opened fire—Troop A charged clear through the town.

This was their day of triumph, when they realized the dream of every trained soldier and closed in to shoot it out. There was no quarter—it was the bandits' own code—and as the *ladrones* fled the town and headed for the hills the Rangers shot them down. High columns of smoke rose up against the sky as the brush roofs were ignited, and when the flames were at their height Buffington Hall galloped in with all his men.

Once before he had seen Fronteras burned, only to rise up more populous than before. Like a wolf's den among the rocks it was a natural breeding-place for robbers and he had come to help wipe them out. They were "Yistas"—men to follow any leader or flag as long as it promised them loot—and burning was not enough. Behind his saddle every Texan carried a slicker-full of dynamite and Buff Hall led the destruction. The ancient presidio went up in a mighty roar, adobe houses were reduced to dust; bricks and timbers were hurled high in the air; Fronteras was laid level with the ground.

"There!" he said, brushing the dust from his hands; and soldiers and Rangers cheered.

CHAPTER L

A Premonition

THERE was no right, no justice, in the destruction of Fronteras. It went beyond that to something more primitive—as a man when he is struck will strike back. A friendly nation had been invaded, but its people were not friendly. Treaties had been violated on both sides. A state of war existed, though it had never been declared—but the Mexicans began to understand.

The garrison of Double Adobes withdrew the machine-guns which so long had pointed into Texas. They had heard of the trees at San Miguel, cut off by one burst of fire; of the charge of Troop A against orders into Fronteras; and realized that they were dealing, not with governments, but men. It had got beyond Washington—and Colonel Ogilvie, for one, was content to let it ride.

But when it was over and the border had quieted down, Fausto Parral made a raid into Texas. Riding his Golden Horse, a white patch over one eye—and the Rangers remembered their oath. They had routed his bandits, destroyed his robbers' den; but Fausto himself had escaped. He had deserted his men in the face of the enemy and fled without shame to the hills. That was his way of fighting, never to stand when he was trapped in an ambush, and the *ladrones* did not hold it against him.

The Fox of Fronteras lived, and Captain Ross called a council of the Rangers. They must avenge the death of Joe Heap—but how? Fausto had rallied his followers far back in the mountains; but he came down—he crossed the Line to spite them. He rode his Golden Horse as a challenge to his enemies—the Mexicans were taking heart. Should it be said that the Rangers, after so many heroic deeds, were unable to catch this man? Win Irons shrugged, Sergeant Miles could only curse, Buster swore he would get back Alazan. Then the two of them fell to quarrelling over the way they had lost Parral and Captain Ross ended the meeting. And then suddenly Fausto was gone.

Then Buster was gone, and the Rangers looked at each other. His tracks had led to the Line. With his wounds barely healed, McCann had crossed again. He would not accept defeat. Win watched, Anitra wept, but he did not return; and all the Villistas disappeared. Still bearing the modern rifles they had received from Don Pancho they had drifted up the river to Presidio del Norte where their chief was fighting for his life. He was defending the town against the army of Carranza and they had gone to his aid.

Smugglers' Crossing was quiet now, no one crossed the Rio Grande, but a messenger from the railroad threw Buff Hall into a frenzy of rage. Pony Deal had been shipping his cattle. While along the border they had been fighting off robbers, pursuing outlaws, charging across the Line, Pony had found a way out. He had split up his stolen herds,

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driving them in to isolated stations, shipping hundreds from every desert sidetrack.

"Hell's—bells!" wailed Hall, for half the cattle had been stolen from him, "ain't they no such thing as law? Where's the brand inspectors? Where's the Cattlemen's Association? Have I got to do everything myself?"

Then in a fine frenzy, he ordered out his cowboys and headed for the railroad. But Winchester stayed behind.

HE had had a hunch that would not be downed—Anitra must not be left alone. She was too beautiful, too precious, to be left in Escondido under the protection of a half-crippled Indian. Fausto Parral was riding the trails, Pony Deal was in the hills—and Anitra was lonely for Win, anyway. Just to sit in the tower with her lover by her side was pleasure enough for her; and, left by themselves, they began to plan and dream as they had so often before. But as they talked of another life, far away from the Rio Grande, Win's keen eyes picked out a figure from the brush.

It was a woman, riding a *palomillo* horse; and Anitra fell silent at the sight of her.

"I see her," she said at last. "It's mother—she's coming to visit me."

"I'll go," offered Irons; but she caught him by the arm.

"No—stay," she begged. "I might need you."

"But your mother doesn't like me," he suggested. "When I rode up there into the Basin with the soldiers she thought I was after Pony—"

"I know," she sighed. "She loves him. To me he seems a very common, vulgar man; but Mother fairly worships him. Oh, Win, don't you believe in mesmerism?"

"I believe in something," he said, "that has put her under his power. Isn't there some place where I can hide?"

He looked around the flat roof and she whisked him out the back way.

"Stay here," she said, "where you can hear me when I call you. Can you understand, dear? I'm afraid! Not of her, of course, but—just stay outside the door."

"All right," he agreed, backing into a corner. "If you need me, just knock three times."

He leaned down and kissed her and she smiled back at him bravely.

"I won't go with her," she promised. "I won't go."

CHAPTER LI

A Spare Horse

IT was a bad sign for Don Rifle, this woman from Maverick Basin riding down — though forbidden — to see her daughter. Once before she had come, and Anitra had run away with her, only to be kidnapped into Mexico. In some mysterious way, never fully explained, Fausto Parral had snatched her away. But why had he been there—and why had Pony Deal made friends when he knew Parral had carried her off? It was bad, it was sinister, and this coming of Anitra's mother might easily be part of some plot.

Anitra's father was away, the cowboys were away, the Rangers were up the river at Presidio. It would never do to let Anitra leave the house, but her mother would try to steal her. He stood near the door as they came up the stairs, and already Mrs. Deal was crying.

"Oh, Anitra!" she sobbed. "The whole world is against us! Buff is trying to get Pony killed. But I won't let them do it—I'll protect him with my life. And Dearest, we're going away!"

There was a long silence, and she spoke again.

"Are you ready, dear? You know I love you!"

"Yes, Mother," she answered, "but I do not intend to go. I'm going to stay here, with Father."

"With *Buff?*" she demanded, and her voice became harsh. "And marry that Ranger, eh?" she twitted.

"Yes, marry Win," replied Anitra.

"After all I've told you of his underhanded tricks, and the cold-blooded way he murders people? Why, when he was shipping cattle up at Ganado he all but took Pony's life!"

"Yes, and Pony all but took *his* life! I heard about that from Win. And Mr. Deal was stealing Father's cattle by the thousand—you could see where the

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brands had been changed!"

"Yes, that's what *he* said!" rejoined Mrs. Deal, bitterly. "But let me tell you about Buff Hall. How did he get all his cattle except by stealing them? It was terrible! I couldn't stand it!"

"Well, then how do you stand being with Pony Deal? I know very well he's changed our Hog Eye brand to five or six others that burn over it. I've seen them myself—lots of times. And after what happened when I was with you before—"

"Oh, but Anitra dear," she sobbed, "he was drunk."

"I don't care!" declared Anitra resentfully. "I'll never leave this house. I'll never go near him nor have anything to do with him. Oh, it was horrible! Horrible!"

"Yes, I know," wept Mrs. Deal. "It's one of the crosses I have to bear. But he told me he was sorry. He's a good man, Anitra—I can't imagine what came over him. But those wretched saloon-keepers are always supplying him with whiskey and—"

She broke down again and fell to sobbing and Anitra seemed trying to comfort her. They talked in low tones, Win could hear her mother crying, and then she spoke up, clear and loud.

"Oh, darling, you don't know how I'll miss you. We're going to New York, to London, to Paris, and for the first time in my life I can buy everything I want—live the life that a lady should. But what will it amount to without my beautiful daughter, to wear the wonderful gowns I'll buy? You *must* come with me, Sweetheart!"

"No!" replied Anitra with finality. "Now please don't argue with me, Mother. And if Father should come home and find you here—"

THERE was a fresh outburst of weeping, Mrs. Deal went running down the stairs; and as, with Anitra following her, she started down to get her horse, Irons ran around the house. Something warned him still that there was a motive in this wild grief, though perhaps no more than the desire of a mother to inflict final punishment on her child. She was leaving, that was the point, and as Winchester came to the corrals he crouched and hurried along the fence. She was scolding still, standing close to her fine horse with her face half-buried in his mane, while Anitra held her in her arms.

But above the sound of her sobbing Irons could hear the chug of approaching hoofs and he instantly dropped out of sight. It was Bandy Storms, leading a spare horse behind him, his tough mug twisted into a grin. He rode in between Anitra and the house and Winchester followed quickly after him. Irons was almost behind the women when he sighted Pony Deal and stopped short.

This was a conspiracy—Win could see that at a glance—and yet he could hardly believe it. Deal came down the Basin trail and dismounted, beckoning Bandy to bring up the horse. Not until then did Anitra look around. Her eyes widened—she saw Storms and backed away—and Pony Deal caught her by the hand.

"Come on," he said, peremptorily; and Anitra gave a startled scream.

"Shut up!" yapped Deal tossing her up on the spare horse; but as he swung up on his own mount he came face to face with Irons, waiting. Win had let him carry it through—now he knew his intentions—and as their eyes met he went for his gun. In a sudden illumination the evil countenance of his enemy flashed up and went out in smoke. Both guns spoke together—Win ducked as he shot—and Deal fell back off his horse. Then another gun roared, a bullet plucked his sleeve, and Irons shot Bandy—three times.

CHAPTER LII

Troubles Enough

PONY DEAL lay dead—Bandy Storms was out—but the women did not scream. It had all happened so suddenly they hardly knew who was shooting until, in the duel, Bandy fell. Winchester stood silent, the blood dripping from one hand where a bullet had grazed his arm, and Anitra stared at him, curiously.

"They were trying to kidnap you," he explained; and at the words Mrs. Deal looked around. In the confusion of the fighting, she had lost track of her

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husband. Now she saw him lying dead in the sand where he had fallen off his horse.

"O-oh!" she shrieked, rushing towards him, and Irons beckoned Anitra away. Never until then had she seen a man killed and her eyes had a strange, hunted look.

"Come," he said; but she drew away, fearfully.

"No!" she cried; and at that moment her mother screamed and came running.

"Oh, you devil—you schemer—you cold-blooded murderer!" she clamored; and struck him across the face. "It was all a plot to kill him! I know it!"

Win caught both her hands as she rushed in on him. He knew Mrs. Deal—she would go out of her head and say anything. Scream, weep, defend the name of her husband—and all before Anitra. But Pony Deal had been attempting a kidnapping—a crime which, in that country, would have earned him short shrift and an even more disgraceful death. Yet there was nothing that Irons could say. He glanced back at Anitra, read hate and anger in her eyes.

"Go away!" she said, choking. "I never want to see you again!"

Then he left—he never knew how—with the shrieking of Mrs. Deal in his ears. It had been a bloody business, but Pony Deal had been stopped. He had used his own wife to lure Anitra from Escondido—played a desperate game, and lost. Irons had done his duty and felt no regrets, but he rode up the river in a daze.

They had let their fair goddess remain too long in this land of violence and lust. She had seen what one man would do to steal her—and what another would do in her defense. But it was a raw, cruel business and Anitra would never be the same. He had lost her—without meaning to against his will, but inexorably—and now he must seek new scenes.

A SMOKE rose up across the river in Old Mexico—and another, to show it was smoke-talk, a signal. Through his glasses he saw a black horse by the fire and made two more smokes in answer. Then, wet from the deep crossing, Buster McCann rode up and looked him over suspiciously.

"Well!" he said. "What's the matter with *you?* I'm having a little trouble, myself."

"That's good," answered Win. "Perhaps I can help you. Don't care much what happens to me, now."

"Aha!" nodded Buster. "Fell out with *her*, eh?"

This is a hell of a country," railed Don Rifle, without answering him. "No matter how close you guard a woman like her some whelp comes along and steals her."

"Anitra?" barked Buster, his eyes wild.

"Ye-es!" rasped Win. "But I fixed him, damn quick. Pony Deal had her up on a horse ready to go when I shot him between the eyes. And then Bandy Storms butted in and got his—how's things going with you now, Buster?"

"I've got troubles enough to pack hell a mile—if what you're looking for is action. Fausto Parral has side-stepped me again and gone up to join Pancho Villa."

"A-all right," smiled Irons. "Let's go and get him."

"That's me!" grinned Buster. "I'll git the bastard, yet. He's sold his soul to the devil, that's sure—he can slip out of any trap—but I've cut a cross on my six-shooter bullets and all I want is one more crack. Jest put me in range and I'll bust him wide open—and shoot it out with the rest."

"I don't need any cross," responded Don Rifle, grimly. "And say—we might talk to Villa. There's one man that's made man-killing a business."

"Shore has," agreed Buster. "Trouble is, you can't git close enough to talk. Old Pancho is losing out and feeling ringy—his orders is to kill Gringos on sight. Any Yank that crosses the Rio Grande—"

"Yes, I know," nodded Win. "But don't forget who I am. I'm the man that Pancho Villa gave a name to."

"O-oh — sure!" shrilled McCann. "Don Rifle—after his rifle!"

"Yes, and he gave me a letter—and I've got it yet—saying that Winchester Irons is his friend."

"Good!" mocked Buster. "Jest put it on a bullet and send the good word across. And tell him when you do it that

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your fat friend, Sin Ropa, has got some big news for his ear. Fausto Parral has double-crossed him already—sold out to the Carranzistas."

"He — has!" yelled Winchester. "Who told you?"

"Oh, a saddle-colored gent that's got it in for him. Kinder hoping I'd pass the word along. Seems Pancho got short of soldiers last week, so he sent down and called in Fausto. Most of his men have got Villa rifles, anyway; and you know—'we bandits must stick together.' But Fausto can't play straight with anybody. He left a big hole in his line the other night and the Carranzistas went through. Not so awful many, but they had machine-guns and played hell. And Pancho ain't got any. *Ninguno!*"

"Yeah! Too bad!" shrugged Irons. "I wonder if we can't make a trade."

CHAPTER LIII

A Friend of a Friend

PRESIDIO, Texas, was full of soldiers, Texas Rangers and officers of the law, any one of whom might be looking for Win. He had killed two men at Escondido and left without stopping to explain, so he kept in the shadows and worked down towards the crossing that led over to Presidio del Norte.

It was dark down in the willows where they hid their horses and on both sides of the river the guards were lined up thick. There was a battle on in the old pueblo and Villa was getting the worst of it. No one crossed—no one dared to cross—but Buster and Win did not care. Where that long line of gunfire winked along the ridge Fausto was holding the left wing. He was the man they wanted and they were going over to get him. Just going and taking a chance.

It was open season along the Rio Grande—and so many Mexicans had been killed in Texas, so many Americans in Mexico, that shooting had become a habit. Especially after dark, when the gunrunners were out and the Customs Guards were after them. Once across and facing General Villa, Irons figured he had a chance. Buster went in recklessly, as usual, leaving all to Lady Luck.

They drifted down below the ford to where the river was deep, and Buster held up his hand. In a house on the Mexican side some soldier was twanging a guitar, and McCann had got a hunch.

"That's a Texas Mexican," he said. "Hear them jazz tunes? Right up to date."

"Might as well drop in on him," suggested Irons, "and sing a few ourselves."

"O.K.," agreed Buster, "but let me do the talking. Nothing like a little *pela'o* to kid them out of killing you."

They stripped off their boots and outer clothes and left their six-shooters with the rest. Then they slipped into the cold water and swam across with sticks in their hair. A row of adobe houses stood along the river's bank and from the half-open door of one of them came fire-flickers and the booming of a guitar. A voice inside began a popular air and Buster took up the refrain as he walked in and shut the door.

There was a fire-place in the corner, a bed along the wall, and on it a Mexican officer who had stopped in the middle of a chord.

"Good evening," greeted Buster in *pelado* and walked over towards the fire where a coffee-pot stood on the coals. He picked up a cup, poured out a sup and grinned as he drank it down—hot.

"With permission," bowed Win, and poured himself a drink while the young Captain watched him, warily.

"Sing us another one!" urged Buster. Then, with a laugh as the Mexican refused, he picked up the guitar and began. It was a Mexican song — and he played it well. Other Mexicans came and stared through the doorway, but still the young Captain did not speak. His service pistol was hanging out of reach, but his guests were too polite to approach it. They were Americans, and up to some mischief, but their business seemed to call for no haste.

"Now you play!" insisted McCann, passing over the instrument. "How about a little more jazz?"

"No," decided the Captain. "I do not feel like jazz. What do you know?" he inquired in English.

"Oh—nothing," evaded Buster; and the Mexican corrected him sharply.

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"Yes, you do!" he said. "You know the day you will die."

THERE was a hush then and Win could see the soldiers outside, biting their lips in anticipation of a killing.

"*Ah—no le hace*—it makes no difference," shrugged McCann. "Can I ask a favor first?"

"*I* will do the asking!" returned the Captain. "Where did you learn to speak that *pelado?*"

"Oh, in this country here. I have lived in Mexico a long time."

"But you are an American—no?"

"Yes," nodded McCann. "You speak very good English yourself. Were you born on the other side?"

"Never mind! I will do the asking. Where were *you* born?"

"In Las Cruces, New Mexico, *mi Capitan.*"

"Yes? And who did you know there? The Salinas family?"

"Yes, indeed!" beamed Buster. "I went to school with Yermo and Jose."

"And the girls?"

"They were pretty, but I did not know them."

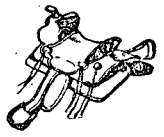
"A-ah, rascal!" accused the Captain; and for the first time he laughed. "Well," he said, "if you are a friend of theirs you are a friend of mine, and it would not be right to kill you. Now what is the favor you wish?"

"First of all," grinned McCann, "a cigarette. It was cold when we swam the river. But our errand was urgent and we could not turn back. We wish to see General Villa."

"I have a letter and a safe-conduct from him," explained Irons. "It is a matter of great importance."

He took the oiled-silk package from the sleeve of his undershirt, but the officer waved it back.

"It is enough," he said, "that you are a friend of my friend. I will lead you to General Villa, myself."



CHAPTER LIV

The Ears of Fausto Parral

IN an inner room—reached through many other rooms of the great *cuartel* at Presidio—Pancho Villa sat brooding alone. His mood was low and his Dorados walked softly—all except Butcher Fierro. He was the commander of the famous Golden Guard—a big man, proud and truculent, weighed down by a huge pistol which it was his constant desire to use.

"My General," he said, hurrying in importantly, "two Americans have swum the river to see you. They are accompanied by Juan del Razo."

"Bring them in," ordered Villa, looking up. "Perhaps they are the gunrunners with the two machine-guns. Ah, if I but had them now!"

"*Quien sabe,*" shrugged Fierro, flapping his hand to beckon them in; and they entered, each wrapped in a blanket to keep out the evening cold.

"Well?" demanded Villa, impatiently; and Buster took the lead.

"My General," he began speaking the *pelado* which he knew Villa loved, "when we heard this news we left our pants behind us to get it to you quicker. That shows it is important—no?"

"Perhaps," grinned Villa. "Is it good news or bad—or something about my machine-guns? You did well to cross the river at all. What a pity you did not bring them!"

"We could not stop for guns," answered Buster. "This very night your left flank will be attacked—and this time an officer who has turned traitor will let the enemy through. Have I permission to speak his name?"

"A little moment!" said Villa, waving the others from the room until only Fierro remained. "If the man is a traitor he will have a spy—no? Now who is this rascal who would betray me?"

"Fausto Parral—no less!" responded McCann; and stood in fear of his life.

"What?" yelled Pancho, leaning closer as if to hear—or strike him dead. "You say Fausto? He is in command of that wing!"

"To be sure," nodded Buster. "That is where the joker comes in. For while

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Fausto was at Double Adobes he became acquainted with this Colonel Ochoa, who now opposes you on the left. And, being as you know a man given to tricks—one who has sold his soul to the devil—Parral has made a trade to open up his line and let Ochoa's soldiers through. Once already he has done that and called it a mistake; but tonight, as this message says—"

He took out a match-carrier, made of two empty cartridges stuck together, and Villa snatched it away from him. Then, cursing his lack of education, he passed the paper to Fierro, who had once been a freight conductor and could read. With eyes that turned red and bulged out of his head he listened and trembled with rage.

"Go arrest him! Bring him here!" he roared. "Son of a thousand fathers, has he offered to betray me after I have given him all those guns? Take fifty Dorados and surround his camp. Then seize him and bring him bound. I will order General Robles to disarm all his men and prepare a proper welcome for this Ochoa."

HE sprang into action, shouting out orders in furious haste until nothing remained to be done. Then for the first time he stopped to look at Irons, who had stood muffled up in his blanket.

"And this man?" he questioned. "Who is he?"

"Don Rifle, my General," responded Winchester, stepping forward. "It is a name that you yourself gave me when I was crossing cattle at Double Adobes."

"*Verdad?*" exclaimed Villa, staring; and then he burst into a laugh. "I remember!" he said. "You are that honest American who paid when the tally-sheets were lost. But," and his face darkened ominously, "a short time later you attacked Fronteras."

"That is so," admitted Win. "But it was not of my choosing. This same Fausto Parral, after murdering your customs collectors, took me and my cowboys prisoners and brought us to Presidio to be executed. But this letter which you gave me saved my life, so I went back and destroyed his wolf's den."

He drew out the little package in its oiled-silk wrapper, and when Pancho saw his own signature he chuckled with childish delight.

"You are a good man, Don Rifle!" he said. "I am proud that I gave you that name. And an honest one, too—I could use a man like that. Perhaps you could bring over some guns."

"Perhaps," smiled Irons. "But my price would be high. I have come to ask a favor."

"Machine-guns!" went on Villa. "I have two at Presidio, but my runners cannot get them across."

"I will bring them both across tonight if the General will but pay me my price."

"And what is that price?" demanded Villa eagerly.

"The ears of Fausto Parral!" answered Win.

"What?" stammered Pancho; and then his eyes grew wise.

"*Muy bien,*" he said. "When you bring me the machine-guns—eh, well, we will shoot him with them."

CHAPTER LV

The Chimes

THERE was a battle that night on the heights above Presidio that rose in fury with the hours. Pancho Villa was fighting to save the town and the bullets were falling everywhere. Along the Rio Grande the soldiers and Texas Rangers stood guard, keeping everybody back; and yet, through the lines, two men passed with machine-guns, for the honor of the service was at stake. A price had been set—the guns must go through—and Colonel Ogilvie helped clear the way. It was anything to get Parral.

Villa's men fought well, but the Carranzistas outnumbered them; and along the left wing the chatter of their machine-guns drove even the Dorados back. Yet at last they made a stand and, from across the Line, they heard the stutter of another machine-gun. *Prrr!* Rat-tat—trrr-rat-tat! And then a mighty cheer! A second gun joined in, running off a whole belt, spitting burst after burst into the night!

Then the Villistas charged, sweeping everything before them, and once more

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Presidio was saved. The machine-guns had done their work, Fausto's treachery had landed him in a trap. But would Villa kill him as he had promised or would he let him escape?

A dozen times before he had been backed against the wall—a hundred times he had been led into some ambush; but always, by some wile or devilish trick, he had escaped the fusillade. For fifteen years Captain Ross and his Rangers had chased him on both sides of the Line; Colonel Ogilvie had invaded Mexico to punish him. Now Army and Rangers alike had got behind these two men who had staked everything on one last try.

The heights behind Presidio, Texas, were crowded with excited people, looking across the river at the cathedral against whose wall the arch-traitor would die. But Villa was taking his time. Soldiers swarmed back and forth, Dorados guarded the prisoner, the whole garrison was lined up on parade; but it seemed like an idle show until a machine-gun rapped out its challenge.

Prrrt! Prrrt! Trrr-rat-tat-tat!

"*Viva!*" yelled the Mexicans. "*Viva Villa!*"

The great cathedral bell boomed out the long *Bong* that announced his death, and the soul of Fausto passed on. Then the little bells joined in, rolling over and over as if in a jubilee, and the Americans on the hill-tops cheered. He was dead, then—this bandit who had harried them so long, defying even the Texas Rangers; and Captain Ross shook hands with his former sergeant, for he knew what Irons had been through. Then the crowd closed in around them and was sweeping them down the Main Street when they met a troop of cavalry coming in.

It was Troop A from Smugglers' Crossing and, as he passed, Win's heart leapt—and stopped. Riding with the Captain was Anitra on Bigotes and when their eyes met, *she smiled.* She was coming out then, escorted by Captain Latham, removed at last from that white house on the hill where she had undergone so much. His worn face lighted up, and he was turning to join her, when he found his way blocked by Mrs. Deal.

Her eyes were deadly, she laid one hand on her pistol and with the other waved him angrily away. She was a dangerous woman now, from whom the last of her beauty had fled—the consort of an outlaw whose death at Win's hand had saved him from a worse shuffling off.

"You leave my daughter alone!" she ordered; and Captain Ross drew him away.

"Let me handle that woman," he said. "The Rangers have taken over Maverick Basin, and she'll have to change her ways."

HE gave Irons a shove towards the Rangers camp and followed her into the old hotel, but she ignored him and went straight up to her room. The Captain was still waiting for her outside when Irons rode up on Blue.

"Come over here," beckoned Ross. "And look out for Mrs. Deal. I wouldn't put it past her to shoot you. She's peeking out from behind that curtain."

There was a movement in the room above and Winchester stepped out of range. It was a battle between them, but he was bound to claim Anitra. One look from her blue eyes had set his heart to beating as it had the first time they met, but the Captain held him back. Then Buster came galloping up the street—huge, grinning, wet—and thrust a small package into his hand.

"With the compliments of General Villa!" he said, and waited for him to unwrap the rag.

Win did it without thinking, still watching for Anitra, and he started when he saw what it was. Two ears, one cut in two by a knife-slash—the sure sign that Fausto was dead. But now was not the time to traffic in human ears and he passed them quickly on to Ross. It was to protect the woman he loved that he had fought Fausto Parral and shot Pony Deal. Now all he wished was to forget. But a window had opened above them, and an eye was staring down. Then a door slammed upstairs, Mrs. Deal came rushing upon them, snatched the package and tore it open.

"What's this?" she demanded and before Ross could reclaim it she had uncovered Fausto's ears.

"Haugh!" she cried, flinging it down in disgust; and she turned and called up the stairs.

"Anitra!" she cooed, in mock-sweet-

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ness. "Come down here. Your lover is waiting."

"So!" she went on, putting her foot on the ears and turning to glare at Irons. "I just want my daughter to see what kind of a murderer you are!"

THERE was a movement upstairs, quick feet came running. Then the Captain jerked Mrs. Deal aside, Buster snatched up the ears and Anitra ran out, beaming.

"Oh—Win!" she cried, throwing herself into his arms—and her mother drew a gun.

"Excuse me, madame," broke in the Captain, austerely, and snatched the pistol away. "Now!" he went on. "You might as well come quietly. I've got a warrant for your arrest."

"You—you what?" she demanded, suddenly weakening.

"Sergeant Irons is too valuable a man for a woman like you to kill. And there's still such a thing as law—even in Maverick Basin—now that Pony Deal is dead."

"Anitra!" she called back as he led her off.

"Win will take care of her," said the Captain. And as he glanced over his shoulder he smiled.

"Why, what does he mean?" quavered Anitra; and suddenly she was weeping on his breast.

"Oh, take me away, Win," she sobbed. "Where I'll never see her again. Clear out of this country, where we can forget all that's happened. Let's just mount and ride away."

"Right now!" promised Irons, looking around for a horse; and Buster handed him his reins.

"Take Blackie," he whispered, hoarsely; and Win knew what was in his mind.

"Good luck," he said; and as they rode away Buster headed across the Line.

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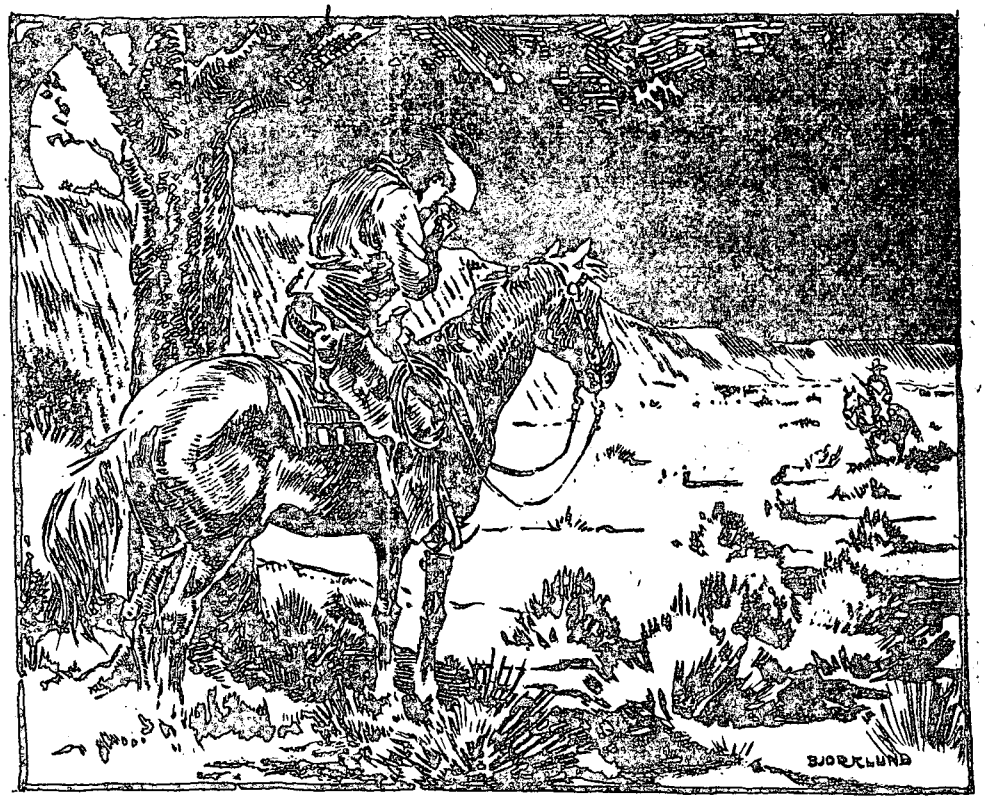

FIGHTING SHERIFF

By H. C. WIRE

CHAPTER I

SAM GIBSON riding in the dark, came down the trail from the Honey Bee home ranch, reached a fork with the main road, and halted.

Directly across from him loomed a clump of cottonwoods, blacker still against the new darkness of night. Peering at them, he struck a match, held it to the bowl of a pipe in his mouth, then blew it out. The flare lasted only an instant, yet long enough to show his bearded face.

"All right, Gibson."

The voice came from the cottonwood clump and at once seven forms detached themselves out of the shadows. Five held back. Two advanced their mounts more rapidly.

"That you Dutch Boyd?" Gibson called.

"You needn't yell it!"

The spokesman drew his pony close beside the one standing at the fork. "You're late, we've been waiting for you."

The older man nodded. "I know it, Dutch, and I'm sure sorry to hold you, because I'm not going along."

"What!" A warning tone came into the voice. "Say, look here. I don't know as you can draw out on us now; you know too much. What's the matter? You said last week you'd go."

"I meant it. But since then June has come home, and today I decided you'd have to count me out."

Boyd shook his head. "No, I guess not. You're first on the water stream and you'll get first benefit of what we do tonight."

"And I'll be the first one suspected. But it isn't that. If you'd let me do the moving my way, I'd throw in like I promised. But you're taking the lead."

"Yep. I am."

"So I ain't following."

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Boyd whirled his horse, flinging back over one shoulder, "Wait there."

He reached the group that had remained in the darkness across the road and said bluntly, "Old Man Gibson's backed out."

A low muttering met this.

"What do you say about it," Boyd snapped. "Speak up, we ain't got all night!"

"What's wrong?" one asked.

"Says it's because his daughter has come home. He can't risk getting in bad on account of her. I guess he knows I'm running this thing to a finish. Well?"

"Oh let him stay. Old Man Gibson knows when to keep his mouth shut. There's enough of us here anyhow."

"All right. Strike out, I'll catch up."

While the six rode on, Boyd paused long enough to say, "You're out of it, Gibson. That means you never heard anything or saw us here tonight."

"I'd hang before I'd squeal and you know it," came the solemn answer. "But my advice is go easy, just move 'em, no more."

A spurt of hoof-flung gravel came back with Boyd's retort. "Leave that to me!"

Soon seven men were riding across the deserted flats, straight through the velvety darkness with no guide save the north star hung low over Snake's Head. Scattered words that came from them were directed only to their horses, for seven men with a rifle in the loop of each saddle need not talk among themselves. Their plans are already made.

In half an hour Snake's Head grew more bold against the stars, a promontory jutting out from the foothills to form the triangular shape of a rattler's skull. Its base went into the mountains, as if the Jawbone Range were the reptile's body, while along one side ran the Little Jawbone Creek.

Now, making the thing even more real, two red fires, like eyes, glowed upon that wide part of the head nearest the hills. There was a challenge in those eyes, a defiant signal that nestlers had come into Jawbone Valley and claimed the one water stream which heretofore had been common property of all cattlemen.

FIRM in the belief that a court of law would uphold their claim, they had flung a dam across the creek and brought logs from the mountains to build a home. Though six months had passed, the court had not yet decided whether they were right or wrong. So in this hour the long delay was to be settled. The decision of the law was slow, too slow, when the decision of a bullet could be so swift.

Seven men rode up Snake's Head and reached a point midway between the two eyes. There the leader halted.

His hand waved toward one fire. "That's the nesters' outfit where they've started the log house. This other is the Mexican camp down by the dam. Four of you come along with me and we'll get the Mexicans first. Two of you boys from the Bar O ride herd on the nester. Don't begin until you hear us, then let 'em have it. Come on."

The leader and four split from the bunch and went at a walk until two tents showed behind the embers of a campfire. One was dark. The second was lighted, a lantern hung inside throwing the shadows of several men against the canvas walls.

No word came from the riders. For a moment they paused. Then came the glint of a rifle barrel, a crackle of shots, repeated, the deeper roar of revolvers joining in. Every aim was low on the tent wall, about the height of chairs and bunks.

A single figure ran out. A bullet spun him instantly back and dropped him.

"Pull the tents down!"

Long lithe shadows darted through space, caught the tent poles in their loops and with horses backing away, dragged the canvas into a heap. From one pile the lighted lantern exploded into a tongue of flame.

"Let it go! Light the other one!"

Sounds of shooting from beyond the ring of firelight told that the men above had started their work.

"We'd better go help," came the final order.

So with two smears of fire at their backs to mark what was left of the Mexican camp, the five raced to be in on the end of that other.

Here the killers' work was not being so easily accomplished. Shots from the trees were answered by spurts of red from between chinks in the unfinished log house,

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showing the squatters were using the place to advantage. But seven riders surrounding the cabin, pouring their lead through open windows, soon brought two men out of the door. Their hands were held high.

"Friends! Friends!" a voice began.

One of the Bar O men charged toward them, cutting off the plea with his snarl, "Run you skunks! Let's see how fast you can run!"

Into the dark they went, spurred through agonizing seconds of delay, with the safety of utter blackness just a step beyond. Then upon the very threshold of it, they pitched down, lifeless in their tracks.

Deliberately the Bar O representative ejected the shells from his gun, reloaded and turned to obey his leader's next order.

"Fire the house! Get your dynamite under the dam and let it go. Quick! We've got to ride now."

Another, higher smear of flame burst into the night. A muffled roar and a crash of falling rock told that the dam was gone. Then seven men vanished by different trails.

CHAPTER II

ABOARD Number Ten, thundering west across the highlands with the first light of dawn, Hap Emory was already out of his berth and in the dressing-room. In part it was the habit of the one-time ranchman still within him that drove off sleep the moment a streak of gray cut the sky. Also he was eager for a glimpse of the Jawbone Mountains, now lying pale pink beyond the blue flats.

But mainly he wanted to see Conductor Brennen, alone. He had a favor to ask of Brennen, and was confident that through old friendship it would be granted.

Shaving, he stood with attention half on the job, half on the green curtains at his back, and so caught sight of the familiar white head which was presently thrust between them.

"Hello, Brennen."

The man in brass buttons came closer, peering into the young face behind its covering of soap. "Well, you danged pup, you! Hello, Hap Emory. How's the Jawbone sheriff?"

"The sheriff's all right, but I don't know about Jawbone itself."

The conductor dropped into a chair, looking up with interest. "Been away long?"

"Just a month. Been looking over the state capitol. I'm going to sit there in the next legislature, you know."

Brennen snorted. "If you get enough votes!"

"I will," Hap declared. "I've stumped a good part of the country. My chances look rosy." He paused to squint over the top of his towel. "How are you voting?"

"Me? I'm always for a dogey. Don't worry, boy. You've got mine."

Hap busied himself for a moment, then asked, "Anyone beside me getting off at Jawbone?"

"Lord, no!"

"That's right; Lord, no. I'm not either. Brennen, there's been trouble, something serious, I guess, according to the tone of the telegram I got from my deputy. I want to look around before anyone knows I'm back. I'll go right on through Jawbone and I want you to slow this train enough when we pass Ten Mile Siding so's I can pile off. Will you do it?"

The conductor consulted a pad, frowned, stood up. "Yes. We pass Number Nine Eastbound at Ten Mile. I can tell Casey to throttle down."

"Thanks," Hap said, and not neglecting an opportunity, added with a grin, "While you're about it you might tell him which way to vote."

By the time Number Ten swept down grade into the valley, its whistle shrieking for Jawbone, Hap was dressed and stationed in the rear vestibule, where he could watch from the window without being seen. The town slid by in a row of weather-brown buildings, then came the depot. Here Hap crouched back, stooping as the platform flashed past his eyes.

It was gone in a moment and he straightened up, knowing he was beyond the sight of three figures who stood turned toward the departing train. He had seen the look of surprise upon their faces even in the short time of passing. Returning to get his bag, he reviewed

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that scene. Dutch Boyd and two hands from the Bar O. Then right there were three who must have good reason for wanting to know at once when he was in town; three who were beginning to feel uneasy.

He was at the rear vestibule again when the train slowed for Ten Mile Siding, waited until Brennen came back to stand by the door, then let himself down the steps. His ears caught the conductor's friendly, "So long!" then he was occupied in making stiff legs keep up with the rest of his body as he swung onto the roadbed.

Number Ten picked up speed and was soon crowding itself into the morning horizon, and he stood alone on the desert flats.

Beyond the tracks was the house of a dry-farmer, Joe Carse. Hap walked to it, found the man in his shed and greeted him, saying disgustedly, "Joe, I slept right through Jawbone. Can you beat it? Let me use your telephone, will you?"

"Of course, Sheriff, glad to oblige," Carse started toward the house. Hap stopped him.

"Don't leave your work, I can find it. In the kitchen, I suppose?"

"Yes. Right by the door."

"Good. Don't bother."

HAP went on alone, wanting no one to hear his conversation, found the telephone and called his deputy. After that he returned to pass the time talking politics with Carse.

When at last a lone rider appeared leading an extra horse, he said, "Well, there's my man. I'll be going. Don't forget which way to vote."

"I'll not forget," the man answered earnestly. "You're the one us farmers can depend on."

Hap met his deputy some distance from the house, mounted the spare horse and rode until the farm dropped out of sight behind a knoll. There he halted.

"Now let me have it, Ed. Must be pretty bad or you could have told more in your telegram."

"Oh, it ain't too bad." The deputy turned a grizzled face toward Snake's Head and drawled his story with little interest. "Six Mexicans and the two nesters that were over there got themselves plugged and roasted. I guess the whole of Jawbone was represented in it. If so, there ain't much to do."

Hap surveyed him intently. "Not much to do! I don't give a whoop if every man in the valley was there, they've sneaked in a low-down job behind my back and they'll hang for it."

"Even," said the deputy, continuing to squint off across the sage, "if June Gibson's old man was one of them? June has come home since you were away. Does that make any difference?"

"No, not a bit," Hap answered. "Sam Gibson wouldn't be in with a bunch of killers."

"Maybe not, but Sam's first on the water those nesters were taking, and he's hot-headed."

Hap gave no reply, but sat fixed in his saddle, the warmth brought by knowledge of June's return, cooled again with the thought that her father, always strong-willed over keeping the range open for cattle, might be one of the men he was determined to prosecute.

"Did you get any evidence?" he asked presently.

"I rode over at sunup and collected these." The deputy extended a handful of shells. "I thought I'd better get 'em before someone else did. Those two wrapped up together I found near where the partners were lying dead."

Hap took the brass tubes, putting the pair in a separate pocket.

"The coroner got around just after dawn, too," the deputy added. "Seems like he was mighty quick on the job. He was bought off all right. So there's nothing left."

"Well I'm going to ride over anyway. You'd better go back to town and don't let anyone know I'm here. I'll come in about noon."

The deputy nodded, but remained with one leg hooked over his saddle horn. "If I was in politics," he observed, "and wantin' to sit in the next legislature, I'd not be too danged hard on the cowmen that could put me there. They mostly think you're on their side."

"Ed," Hap asked abruptly, "are you trying to tell me to keep out of this job?"

"Nope. I'm just givin' you an old

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man's advice. Outside of that I'm doin' exactly whatever you say."

"Then travel into town and sit tight until I learn what our first play is going to be. See you later."

CHAPTER III

IT was mid-morning when Hap reached Snake's Head. He rode directly to the mound of black ash which was all that remained of the squatters' cabin. Dismounting, he found that someone, the coroner according to Ed's report, had truly done a complete job. Not only were the bodies removed, but the ground for some distance was trampled by hoofs and marked with wagon tires, leaving no trace of the first prints to have been made.

He observed the same conditions near the stream where two smudges marked the site of the Mexicans' tents. Yet upon returning in a wide detour, he discovered a different set of tracks midway between the two camps. Though separate hoofmarks were not recognizable in the soft soil, the general direction of a trail was well defined by a wide strip of broken brush.

The path led straight toward the main road, giving no further details for the two miles of desert he crossed. The direction suited him, leading as it did closer to town by way of the Gibson ranch. But in half an hour, coming out upon the hard surface of the road directly in front of the Honey Bee fork, he halted, leaping to the ground.

What had drawn him in a swift movement of disbelief, proved to be tracks as freshly made as those which had come across the flat. They were on the home ranch trail. Here they joined with the many others; there they returned up the slope, all done last night.

At once his pleasure in approaching the Honey Bee was gone, turned hateful by duty. Of all the tracks leading in and out of the trail he had followed, these that would take him straight to Sam Gibson's home were the ones most plainly marked. For a moment he paused, letting his eyes sweep upward to where the ranch buildings stood like square beehives on a mesa of the foothills.

What could he say to the man who had been his friend for years, who had helped him into the very place he now held? Sam Gibson had boosted him for sheriff. He could still hear the ranchman's shout at news of the victory.

"Go to it boy! I know you'll do the right thing."

What would Gibson consider the right thing now. Ranchmen or farmers? Hap mounted grimly; it was not a question of cattle or clearings, but of life and law.

Confidence in his oath of duty carried him to the very gates of the house, to vanish into doubt when he saw June Gibson on the veranda.

It was common supposition throughout the valley that Hap Emory and Old Man Gibson's daughter were "the same as engaged." Hap himself was not so sure of it, even if they had been friends for a long time, ever since she had brown pigtails to pull—and he had pulled them—when she was a spindly girl riding her first pony and he was a cowboy on her father's range.

A low chuckle rocked him as he thought of how, in later years, he had stolen a short-cut over the pack of June's suitors when Old Man Gibson, forbade them to make the long trip into the home ranch at roundup season.

"You can't ride herd at my place all evening," Gibson had decreed, "then spend your time until sunup getting back to the outfit and be worth a damn for work the next day!"

So June's callers had been forced to take their turns at going in once every two weeks. All except one. Hap smiled again, wondering if she still remembered the big number seven that meant "Come," and if she still had the little dictionary, which with one he owned exactly like it, was the basis of a code between them.

It had been a simple thing for him to copy down the number of a page and the number of a word in its column, until he had written a whole letter that she could decipher from a duplicate book. So the boys who carried his commonplace notes to the home ranch, and who as often as not read them, never realized what stolen words were scratched in numbers on the reverse side. Even if the stern ranchman was June's father, she entered into this innocent sport of putting something over

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on him, and often rode halfway to the roundup camp when the big seven with its secret message reached her.

THINKING of those days, Hap sighed, for now all such young foolishness was in the past. Her going away to boarding school had left a gap, one of distance, if no more. He wondered if that gap would be mended quickly; if they would mean as much to each other as always.

For his own part the question was answered even as he swung from his horse and crossed the few remaining steps afoot. June in pig-tails had been lots of fun; June returned from boarding school was the prettiest woman he had ever seen. It was her brown hair, her dark eyes, the assured bearing she had learned from the range; but more, it was a look of having seen things beyond the flats of Jawbone.

His first words came with difficulty. "June," he managed, taking the hand held out to him, "I'm sure glad to see you."

She drew him onto the steps before speaking. "Come up here and let me see if you really are. Well, Hap, you look the same as ever. How are you anyway?"

Beneath a warm rise of pleasure Hap felt at once a return of their old understanding. All the ease of speech came back in a flood of questions and answers. Here was the same June Gibson he had always known, except for changes her schooling would naturally make.

When they sat on the edge of the veranda, he said. "Tell me about it, June, what have they been teaching you out there? Gosh, I'm almost afraid to open my head for fear I'll say the wrong thing."

"Don't worry," she laughed. "They taught the same reading, writing and 'rithmetic, only there they called it elocution, correspondence and mathematics."

Hap glanced at her quizzically. "Is this correspondence any better than our old writing?"

"What do you mean?"

He drew a figure seven on the ground with one boot heel. When he looked up, June was smiling into his eyes.

"No, Hap, nothing could be better than that!"

"And the little dictionary?" he asked.

June colored beneath his glance as she admitted, "I'll still have mine."

Hap flushed beneath his own thoughts. "You are an idiot!" he told himself. "But in spite of that, this confession about the little dictionary seemed deeply significant. He felt it was almost as if he had given her a ring and she was still wearing it.

The sun came over the veranda and flooded down upon them. June stood up. "Come in, won't you? I'll have to get dad's dinner. You'll stay with us?"

He hesitated, recalling his business here at the Gibson ranch. "Well, no, June, I'm sorry, but I've got to keep on."

For a full minute of silence she stood looking at him, the light in her eyes slowly fading.

"Hap," she said then, "did you come here to see me, or dad?"

"Why, June—" He could go no further, though silence made his few words weak and unconvincing.

"So that's it!" June broke in sternly. "I'd almost forgotten you were the sheriff! But I watched you over on Snake's Head this morning through the glasses. Have you come to saddle something on dad? Well he's in the lot and will be around any minute now, but I want to talk to you first. Hap, if you know anything, you're going to drop it, and if you just suspect, you're not going any further."

All at once she had become the tense, flashing spirit that showed so often in the Gibson strain. Hap felt her quiet ease with him was gone; in its place was the sudden fire of family loyalty as she understood it. He saw fear leap into her eyes, her hands clenching in the first show of hysterics.

"Of course I followed a trail across the flat and was over on Snake's Head this morning," he said lightly. "But shucks, it's only my duty!"

"Duty!" she cried. "I know your stubbornness. If you decided a thing was your duty you'd hang your best friend. You'd even hang — Hap, listen to me! You'd better go, I don't care how terrible it was, you can't—"

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"What's all this, Junie?" Sam Gibson came around the house, catching the girl in his arms as she ran toward him.

"Dad! Don't say a word!"

"Well, there now," he soothed her, brushing her hair with a gloved hand. "What's all the runkus. Howdy Hap? Have you been saying things to my little girl?"

SHE raised her head quickly. "He's been trailing you, Dad! I watched him. Now he's come to say you're going to be saddled with something."

Gibson's gray brows knitted. He crossed slowly to the younger man. "Is that so, Hap?"

"I'm afraid June is worried. I've said nothing like it and all I want is to talk with you, Sam, alone if we may."

"Why, sure. June, now it's all right. You stay here at the house and let us go a minute. I'm working down by the corral, Hap, come along."

They walked together in silence until they reached the wooden bars. Hap's first glance fell on a saddle pony within the enclosure.

"Hell sort of broke loose while I was gone," he observed.

"Sort of. But come to the point direct. What do you want with me?"

Without answering, Hap climbed into the corral, lifted one of the pony's hind feet, then dropped it. He returned to the fence heavily, and stood with the bars between himself and the ranchman.

"Sam, I hoped by a chance of heaven you would have that broken shoe torn off before I got here. Honest I did. Because now I've got evidence that your horse was in the Snake's Head bunch last night. I don't have to tell you how I hate coming here like this. Where does a man's duty end, Sam? I want your advice."

He looked squarely into Gibson's face, yet saw no sign but a tightening of the hard firm mouth.

"Well?" came Gibson's query. "You're the sheriff, aren't you?"

"Yes, damn it, I'm sheriff and you're the best friend I've got. Besides that I don't need to tell you how I care for June." Hap reached through to clutch the knotted hand that rested on the bars. "I'm bound to a duty, as I see it. Won't you tell me here and now what you know of last night's work? It would save yourself, if it's that bad."

Gibson shook his head. "Not a word."

"I didn't think you would," Hap said. "But what if you're called as a grand jury witness?"

"I'd swear nothing, and hang before I'd say any more than I'm telling you right now. It's no use. You're young and have a life to make; I'm an old buck that's done his already — do what you think is square to yourself and the valley."

Gibson turned away as if there was nothing more to be said, yet hesitated, adding, "Don't be influenced by a girl, even my girl. It wouldn't pay either of you. For her sake I wish I could advise you, but being under suspicion I can't do it."

They parted at the corral gate. Hap walked back alone to get his horse and found June still standing on the veranda. She seemed to read upon his face all the grim determination that was forming within his thoughts, and without a word ran from him into the house.

He rode the rest of the way into Jawbone with the feeling that some power beyond his control was forcing him to act. He couldn't name it as duty. All he knew was the resolve to carry this thing to the end. Sam ought to tell what he was keeping back; if he refused to talk before a grand jury, that would put him in serious trouble even if he was not one of the killers. But Sam would never squeal. Hap knew the ranchman's principles.

His appearance in town caused a sudden flow of life into a street that had been deserted in the mid-day sun. He let his horse walk past the first few buildings, saluting the faces pressed to windows with a wave of his hand. Ahead he saw little groups forming. Then from one a man strode to his horse at a tie rack, mounted and came on toward him.

THE fellow rode with eyes down on the business of making a cigarette, angled his mount in to the sidewalk and blocked the way without apparently doing so. When the two halted, he looked up.

"Well, howdy, Sheriff. Back again?"

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"Hello, Red. How's the Bar O?"

Hap moved in a little nearer, so his voice need not be heard beyond the rider. "Red," he asked, "been doing any night work lately?"

"Where d'you mean?"

"Oh, maybe around Snake's Head. What sort of devilment was pulled off last night?"

Red grinned. "Devilment? Yeah. I guess there was a fire or something." He squinted from under his hat brim, adding, "You didn't lose no votes by it. We've been gettin' in some good words for you, Sheriff. The ranchers are goin' to send you to the legislature."

A moment of silence passed, while Hap considered the cowhand's purpose. "Ned," he asked, "who's paying you to salve me this way? Outside of your forty dollars a month from the Bar O you don't give a damn about Jawbone or me either. How much would it take to get you to tell the truth?"

"Say, what in hell d'you think I am?"

"That," said Hap, letting his horse breast the other aside, "is something I'll answer later."

He went on to the end of the street, left his horse in front of the brick-walled jail and entered a side room which served as his office. The deputy was not in, so he sat alone making a row of empty shells along the table top.

The two Ed had found near the murdered nesters came from his pocket last. He held them in his hand, examining their caps and smooth brass sides that would seem to give no hint of any difference from those on the table. But at the open end of one he paused, and for some time alternately held this and its mate to the window light. Presently these two were stood apart from the main collection.

"Well," came a voice over his shoulder, following a familiar shuffle across the floor, "Now you've got it, ain't you! A forty-five did the killing. Of course every man in Jawbone don't shoot forty-fives."

"That's right, Ed. Most every man does. But how many have Army guns—the old ones?"

"Army forty-fives shoot the same shell as the reg'lar."

"Oh, sure." Hap stood up, gathering the collection into his pocket. "What have you been doing?"

"Keepin' an eye on that Red from the Bar O. Seems like he's broodin' on an answer of some sort you gave him in the street. Now he's gettin' himself primed on white mule and says he'll be lookin' for big game directly."

"Meaning me?"

"Not unless drink gives the fool more guts than he has now. But when I came away he was fixin' to shoot some bottles off the drugstore shelves. Shall I run him in?"

As if to emphasize the Bar O's intention, a report echoed down the street, followed by a second, then an ominous silence.

Ed started to the door. Hap leaped in front of him. "Wait. I want to do this."

The shooting had drawn little interest, but the sheriff's appearance brought several men toward the drugstore, where Hap found the Bar O hand insisting on another drink of whisky from the soda fountain. He saw the two shots had been aimed at a glass of lemonade, now shattered on a table at the rear.

Confronting his man near the counter, aware that several men had strolled in after him, he asked, "What's the trouble Red?"

There was no reply.

"All right, you'd better come along with me and sleep it off. Let's have your gun."

Red mumbled, lowered his hat brim, but made no move to produce the weapon.

"Give me that gun!"

Slowly Red obeyed, glowering from befuddled eyes as he extended the revolver.

"That's better," said Hap, and turning away with one hand on the cowboy's arm, confronted a line of serious faces.

"It's all right," he announced. "Red'll be sober by morning, but I'd better keep him from doing too much damage."

THE line yielded before his advance, some of the men grinning, others still with dark looks, yet none of these betrayed themselves by a word or move as he passed down the street and lodged his prisoner within the brick jail. Then he went at once to his table, emptied the chambers of Red's gun and saw that the two exploded shells remained with four live ones.

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It took but a moment to hold the pair into the sun, then they joined the first two he had put aside. He dropped all four onto the table, not studying them now. They no longer existed as mysterious brass tubes, they represented men; one of them perhaps Sam Gibson. His hand closed about them. It was symbolic, and he saw the meaning. It was the law closing in.

Here before him were shells all identified by a tiny split at the open end; all shot from the same old-model gun whose chamber had worn enough to let the cartridges expand. Red had used that gun, both today and last night. He knew Red. A bribe and a promise would open his mouth. He could hear the confession; Sam Gibson accused. Then he could see himself riding out to bring Gibson in for trial. There would be June—

His hand sprung open. His decision could go no further.

The deputy sat behind him, looking on, but asking no questions. He coughed presently and scraped one boot on the floor, frowning as his chief continued to toy aimlessly with empty shells. At last he walked outside with deep silence imparting his disgust.

It was dark when he returned, to find the sheriff still sitting at the table. "Must be danged interestin'," he declared, "or mighty puzzlin'."

"Both," said Hap, looking up. "How's everything on the street?"

"Black and silent. I've never seen Jawbone so tightmouthed as she's been since you took Red. This afternoon I saw gatherings by twos and threes. The street is empty now, all rode off, but it's my guess they'll be back first thing tomorrow to hear what you've got against him."

Ed departed. Hap wanted to be alone. The riddle of the shells was solved; it was a far deeper one that now confronted him. For an hour he had asked the single question. Which is more sacred, love or loyalty to duty. Which could a man do without, if he must make a choice. It seemed the time of his choosing between the two had come.

Before morning he could have Red's confession, could learn that Sam Gibson was implicated in the Snake's Head job. Gibson's very silence, added to the certain proof of his tracks was already more than he wished to know. And if he convicted the ranchman on any charge, that would turn June from him forever.

The other way was simple; free Red, destroy the evidence of his shells and drop the whole thing.

A footstep not unlike the shuffle of Ed returning, swung him to the door.

"Howdy, Sheriff?" The speaker stood boldly framed against the dark.

Hap stood up, taking a step from the table. "Hello, Dutch. Want something?"

"Yes. I want Red. You don't usually run the boys in for getting full. I've come to take him home."

"Sorry, Dutch, but he's going to stay here." Hap shot a glance at the ranchman's belt. It carried no gun.

Dutch seemed to read the look. "Don't worry. I'm not wearing irons tonight, but I've come to talk turkey. Lay off Red and drop any hunch you've got about that Snake's Head party. I'm saying this for your own health. You've got six slugs in that gun of yours, but if you shoot 'em all, there'll still be one coming your way. See?"

"Meaning there will be seven Jawbone reps lying in the brush for me?"

"You've about guessed it."

"And if you can't take Red, which would signify that I'll drop the whole case, then what?"

"I'll take you." The answer came casually.

"Well, start in!" Hap offered. "Red stays locked up."

WHAT appeared in his vision then, came with the swiftness of magic. Dutch did not move. He stood with both hands braced against the door frame, but at his hip gleamed the blue barrel of a gun.

A step to one side showed another man crouched behind him in the dark. "Now, Sheriff, quick and easy. We're just going out where we can reason with you."

Two hard faces told Hap the men were dead set on what they were about. His barest move toward his gun brought a warning snap from the one turned on him. He knew then his best play was to appear peaceable.

Their work was well planned. With no movement lost, they gathered his col-

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lection of shells, blew out the lamp and left the office locked exactly as if he had departed in his usual way. Three horses stood behind the jail wall. With the same swift dispatch he was bound upon one, his mouth gagged but his eyes uncovered.

A dozen paces from the jail and they were plunging into the blackness of the flats. Through half an hour's time they rode due north. He recognized the first slope of the foothills, the beginning ranks of trees, a stream, then at last their destination. With gruesome meaning they had brought him to the death spot on Snake's Head.

Even as he was released and told to walk into the light of a low-burning fire, he knew the purpose of this trap. Murder cannot end with the first crime, it must cover its tracks, even to killing again. It was so with these men now. To save themselves they would recognize no limit.

While the group that was already gathered spoke in low voices, he studied each man, unaware he was counting the number until a sudden fact struck upon his mind. Here were six. Red made the seventh; seven bullets was the way Dutch had warned him. Then Sam Gibson was not one of the gang! Gibson knew them but would not squeal. That was all.

The discovery left him elated, yet it was short-lived in the face of his own position.

"Sheriff," the spokesman for the gathering was Dutch Boyd, "we might as well state it all at once. You're a bright young man and you've got a business head. We're making you a business deal tonight. Sit down."

Hap squatted on a log in front of the group.

"I guess you know who we all are," Dutch continued. "It ain't no secret now that we've been here on Snake's Head before. But you ain't going to use your knowledge. You're going to drop this case—saw it off at the butt. You'll write a note to your deputy saying you've found your dope was all wrong and telling him to let Red out. It wouldn't do for one of us to deliver it, so you'll write to June Gibson and have her act as messenger. I guess June'll do a lot to keep you safe and your deputy will do as Old Man Gibson's daughter says if she tells him the right story. We'll fix that up."

Dutch paused as if to see what effect his words were having. "Well, that's the lay of it."

Hap smiled dryly. "You said this would be a business deal. Looks as if it is mighty one-sided. What do I get besides my own skin?"

"All you've been wantin'. We reps here just about control the votes that can send you to the capitol—and we'll do it."

FOR a moment Hap remained silent, thinking swiftly back over a period of his life to a time when the roundup held him from June Gibson. If he only had his little dictionary now! But he had not carried it for years. The men before him were waiting.

"Dutch," he said presently, drawing out a sheriff's letterhead. "I am a business man as you say, and I don't think the figures will show that you control the votes of this valley. If I throw in with you the farm people will buck me. They're getting mighty strong."

He held the blank side of his paper into the firelight. "There are seven of you," he began, writing down the number. "How many hands on the outfits each of you represent?"

The men told him, some muttering, but the majority showing an interest in the count. He countinued to put down figures. "Now here's the farmers' side of it."

When that was complete he shook his head. "As far as I can see, the thing is about even."

"Oh, for God's sake!" someone snapped. "Dutch, do we need to carry on like this?"

"No," said the leader, standing up, "I guess we don't. Sheriff, you can take your pick. Start walkin' back to town or write the note clearin' us and releasin' Red."

Walk to town! Walk perhaps to the edge of the light! The choice was given.

"You've got me," Hap admitted. "What shall I say?"

He scratched a line through his figures, a peculiar triangular one which seemed to mark out all the numbers on the page. Then writing on the opposite of the paper with the imprint of his office giving authority, he put down the message

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as the killer dictated. When it was finished, Dutch read it aloud.

"Now, add a little more," he said, "explainin' that you send by June while you're on a hot trail for votes down the valley with Old Man Gibson. The one of us that takes this in will fix it with her. Gibson won't object either, and you won't be the fool to try anything afterward."

He folded the paper and gave it to one of his men. "Push along. It oughtn't take you more than a half hour."

IV

HALF an hour can mean eternity; so Hap learned waiting there on the crest of Snake's Head, with a fire dying low and five men staring in gloomy silence at it. Someone prodded a knot into flame. It died again. A screech owl soared from a branch, sending its cry into the night. Five men sprang up, hands on their guns.

"Drop 'em! We've got you covered!" The command burst sharply, carrying a hard ring. "The bunch of you lie down. You Hap Emory, get out of there."

No figure showed itself until five men were stretched on the ground, arms outspread, then the deputy shuffled in. Behind him came another, who halted halfway.

Hap started toward this one. Ed's call stopped him.

"Hey there! Get these wallowers tied up. You can do your fussin' later."

So it was not until the prisoners were bound and roped together and started on their way to town, with the deputy riding herd behind them, that Hap Emory was able to reach June Gibson's side.

"June. You really came, too? I didn't mean to ask that."

"No. But I couldn't help it. And dad was not home to keep me back."

They walked out of the firelight and into the dim glow of stars, going on to her horse.

Hap's relief left him without words. "You did read it!" he exclaimed at last. "I thought maybe you wouldn't understand."

"I'd understand that lone figure seven on anything," June answered quietly, "and I knew the triangular line meant Snake's Head. I could guess enough of the rest to know that something was wrong, so I got your deputy and came along." She halted, drawing the sheet of paper from her pocket. "But that last mark, what does it mean?"

Hap met her inquiring eyes with a smile, bent down and kissed her.

"This," he said. "Don't ever forget it!"

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Thieves' Rendezvous

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

QUIETLY through the misty drizzle three horsemen slipped along Pekan avenue and swung down together at the Paydirt Bank on the busy corner. The three were half way from the door about their business when Jim Barlow, the guard, focused his eyes on their strange pink-and-white countenances and reached for his gun. On the instant two bullets crossed in his heart. At the shots and Barlow's collapse, Cashier Krebs, George, the clerk, Miss Clamor, the stenographer, and four customers waked to the fact that robbers had them all covered.

The two who had shot herded all the witnesses back into the bank president's office where one stood with his gun held loosely in his grasp and swinging on a limp wrist, and the other ran to gather up the loose paper currency in the cages and around while the first robber entered the vault and emerged with four heavy horsehide pokes containing $40,000 worth of $30 per of gold dust which prospectors had found in a secret pocket and had left in the bank vault for safe keeping.

Before the victim of the shots had ceased stirring where he sprawled on the smooth marble floor, the loot was captured and the two bagmen darted from behind the counter, exclaiming:

"All set!"

The countenances of the bandits were painted a ghastly pink-and-white, the lips dark with lipstick and the eyes exaggerated by blue shadows. They wore ragged blue overalls badly faded, old and dirty shirts, mismated boots and limp, worn out hats which looked like dump heap pickups. Even the garb was overdone and obviously put on for the occasion.

A left-handed robber who was tall, gaunt and bent had shot a beautiful new 6-inch barrel 45-revolver, and drew figure's with the muzzle while he kept

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tabs on the captives. The other killer had fired an old, worn, nickleplated weapon and he was an active, little scamp with swift, gliding motions.

"Let's go!" the robber on guard exclaimed, his voice cool, even and peculiarly soft, and the other two jog-trotted to the side-door and mounted. Then the leader slithered after them into the saddle at a bound.

Cashier Krebs ran after, but saw only just the swirling of the fog behind the racing figures. The City Marshal, two deputy sheriffs and an increasing number of citizens scurried to the alarm. A posse hastily organized and good men raced after the raiders, making sure they had gone into the wild and rough Pekan Creek Valley on the southeast corner of Desolation Basin. For two or three miles they followed the tracks in the roadway, and then the hoofprints disappeared in a tangle washes. Ahead of them loomed the dark forbidding mountains of stony precipice and timber belt with the narrow bottoms of Pekan Creek anything but easy to search. The deputy sheriffs and city marshal went on till dark, trying to cut the outlaw tracks, but it was no use.

ON the following morning, Manager Drenn of the Carcajou Investigations arrived on behalf of the insurance company, and Wess Durango, his operator, slipped quietly off the stage with a leather pack ready for business. Drenn talked to the witnesses, officials, and bank staff. Durango circulated through pool rooms, restaurants and amusement emporiums, wherever those of professional leisure congregated, and in a bunch of traps hanging before a hardware store found inspiration. When he met Chief Drenn surreptitiously in a hotel room, the robber trail was cold.

"Well, boy?" Drenn asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Looks like Lefty Dermat from Red river oil fields," Durango said.

"Lots of left-handed guns!" Drenn exclaimed, "Tall jiggers who hold their gunbutts in loose grips are plenty, you know."

"I know," Durango admitted, "but when Dermat cased that Bluejay oil payroll in the Josie Doe beauty parlor, he stuffed his pockets full of paint, grease, cold cream and lipsticks. He rides horses with an off set caulk to prevent sideslipping ever since he broke his leg that time in New Mexico."

"You're catching on," Drenn grinned with approval.

"I'd better head back into the Desolation Basin," Durango added.

"I don't send you back," Drenn shook his head. "Too many detectives have left their bones there now."

"Nothing else for me to do, is there?"

"That's so, too," Drenn admitted. "Sure be fine if we could make them feel uneasy—drive them out of there!"

Durango had asked around about a chance to trap fur back in the Pekan country of the Desolation. High-Line Flint wasn't going out on his range—getting old. He turned his five cabins and outfits over to Durango, and with two burros loaded with supplies, Durango headed back to the hidden Gate Pass cabin, which a man could find if he had the key on a topographical survey map. In the Pass were the tracks of three horses, one of them with an off-set caulk on a hind hoof. Apparently they didn't know where Flint's No. 1 cabin was, passing within quarter of a mile of the spruce-pine thicket that hid it. Anyhow, Durango had made a big start cutting the robbers' trail, seeing that they were really on their way into Upper Pekan valley.

Old Flint had warned him not to have anything to do with the nesters back yonder, but to mind his own business. Bad hombres, he said, hung out in the valleys. Honest trappers hadn't any use for those scoundrels. Three of them had just come into Paydirt and got away with $40,000 in gold dust and $4,000 in paper money, the old man told the stranger who was taking up his fur country and outfits. But Flint wouldn't talk about them. He was minding his own business—the less any one knew about those scamps the better off he was!

The season was late, winter near, and Lefty Dermat was the kind of a man to hole up for a season before trying to dispose of gold dust loot. There were things about that kind of stuff which made it dangerous to traffic in, when it was hot. Durango reckoned that the

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three outlaws would make their divvy right away, and each one would take his own poke of the stuff. Each one would have, on a three way equal divvy, more than 25 pounds. A detective trying to locate three caches, each one known only to one robber, had his work cut out for him. Two of the three bandits had in a fraction of a second shot to kill. Everything depended on the break—plus the resourcefulness and courage of the operator in taking advantage of any opportunity, however slight or desperate.

Manager Drenn had reckoned it would take all winter for Durango to get into the gang and become cronies with them. He counted on Durango finding a way to be a good fellow and perhaps getting a break with one of the outlaws. The field operator, Durango, didn't express any opinion or discuss any plans. What he thought was of no account as far as Fate was concerned. He went out along the back of the Pekan Mountain range and distributed his supplies prorata in the cabins. He shaped up the trap cubbies and shot a deer for big bait, leaving a chunk of venison in each set-to-be, so marten, pekans, foxes and other furs would get used to the idea there was something to eat with no danger around it at those little stone, wooden-block and niche houses at whose entrances presently a steel jawed trap would be set, ready for a furbearers paw.

PROBABLY the outlaws would run out little lines of traps of their own to kill time, and have something to do in the long winter wait for the hue and cry of manhunters to die down after the Paydirt Bank raid. Looking down into the deep valley with its nester cabins every twelve or fifteen miles, Durango's binoculars revealed the human life around them. Not till he reached the last outfit up the Pekan creek valley, nearly opposite his No. 4 cabin did he discover a stag outfit with four men. He watched a tall man swinging an ax—saw him set up a block of wood and split it—and made sure he was lefthanded. While the man was chopping another man came down the opposite valley slope with a deer across his saddle pommel. A third man was boiling traps in a big soapkettle. All of them had revolver holsters on, except the nester himself, he just shuffled around, dragging his wrist across his nose frequently, and starting when any of the others spoke to him over the left or right.

Durango muffled the bells on his pack burros' necks by day and every time his trail wound around so that he could look into the craggy depths and loneliness of Pekan Valley, he searched the bottoms with his binoculars. Ten miles back there was a small ranch. Another one was five miles higher up the creek. Then at the head of the valley was a pretty pasture where fine horses, half-breed Kentucky track stock and Texas Arabians grazing there in graceful stride and pride.

Those were outlaw horses and here was the outlaw rendezvous and as he cleared out the trapline cubbies, set up the well-sweep forks and made all the motions of being a high-line trapper, his binoculars watched the nester outfit a mile out and a half mile lower down. A 20-power glass was none too strong to give him a line on the gang, four of them now. All one day he lay in a scrub within a third of a mile studying the ways of the quarry he sought as if they had been wolves and the stone-and-log cabin their den.

A tall, angular, singularly graceful man fought the woodpile for hours at a time, swinging a cross-cut saw to block off chunks and then setting them up to split them into firewood. He brought one of his companions out by the scruff of the neck to make him pull the saw. And when the fellow struggled, gripped him with his right hand and cuffed him with his left. And when this bully set a chunk on end he did it with his left hand, but he swung the ax to chop either right or left. His gun hung always on his left side, with the butt turned back, a left hand holster. When he brought out a rifle to look up the creek for game, he carried the weapon in the crook of his right arm and kept his left hand on the receiver. Lefty Dermat, sure 'nough!

An hour later the thud of a shot thrown down the valley by precipice sounding boards, came to the nester outfit and three men ran out of the cabin, one with a fan of playing cards in his hand and another with a rifle. And,

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sure enough, a blacktail buck came scrambling and staggering into sight and fell a hundred yards from the upper end of the edge of the timber flat. One of the three strolled up to the victim and Durango saw the flash of a hunting blade as he dressed out the animal and yelled, presently, for help to drag it down to the gambrel pole at the cabin.

THE successful hunter did not show himself for more than three hours. Perhaps he did not know he had wounded big game. Durango grew uneasy and looked back up the mountain range slope from the brush under which he had hidden. A stone as big as a man's head came bounding down the valley side and hitting a boulder two hundred yards away exploded and mingled blue smoke in the dust and fragments.

Durango froze. He watched up that height, ready to fight for life. Perhaps Lefty had found his tracks—perhaps he had spotted that skulker in the brush—no telling about an outlaw with robbery, murder and desperation in his soul!

Presently the gaunt, shambling wild man appeared coming down off the ridge, keeping close to low evergreens, along rock ledges like a cougar, skulking in the low places and looking over the edges and around the turns for all the world like a grey rogue wolf. He was watching the ranch, though, and when he passed Durango a hundred yards distant he followed a rivulet of water from a spring, stooping low and pausing at intervals, moving slowly when he was in sight of the cabin.

"He trusts nobody!" the detective decided. "He'd shoot a stranger down on sight!"

Glad when darkness came, Durango in his soft-soled moccasins headed back up the mountain to the No. 3 High Line Flint cabin. No one had been there, or at least nothing had been disturbed—not the knife, fork and spoon left apparently negligently on the table, not the direction of the teakettle spout, not a stick left balanced on the door latch, none of those apparent trifles whereby a wildcrafter can tell whether or not his outfit has been searched. In the morning no tracks were around the cabin, and the burros, pastured over the other side in a beaver meadow had not been found—thanks perhaps to muffled bells.

Durango cut down through the timber looking for Lefty Dermat's track where he had come along the mountain side. The outlaw wore laced hunting boots with big heels and hobnails. The tracks were in a runway along a bench about a thousand feet below the back of the ridge and it led back to the foot of a low, jagged ledge only thirty or forty feet high and there, for a hundred yards, the footprints disappeared, right where the going was rough and where a man would naturally stick to the trail. There, too, the break-place was in plain sight of the ranch in the valley a long mile out and far below. Durango wasn't caught napping. He had climbed around those open places in the trail, keeping out of sight, and now he lay back to a fallen tree to examine that open slope and shattered wall of granite, shrubs, moss, three fallen logs and the rest. His small game glasses, 7-power, showed even the flowers of the moss, and presently where a heavy foot had slipped he saw black humus. Then he saw a twig freshly broken on beyond. The tracks had gone behind a prostrate spruce tree four feet through. They reappeared at the other end going down to the game runway.

It took Durango an hour to go that hundred yards, and if Lefty Dermat had not been restlessly chopping wood he wouldn't have dared risk showing himself against the mountain slope, far as it was from the cabin. Behind the log, nearly midway of it, there was a slit in the rock ledge. The slit was chinked with quartz chunks as well as with granite. The stone pieces were draped cunningly with moss, and behind them were two horsehide pokes sewn with sinew, and in each of them was about twenty pounds, avoirdupois, of gold dust. Lefty Dermat had divided even with his two bandit pals; he had taken and cached half the placer gold loot, and they had taken half.

"Now I've got half of it back!" Durango exulted.

HE took the pokes from their cache and carefully rebuilt the mossy retaining wall across the face of the crack in the ledge. Foot by foot he crawled

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back to where his rifle rested with his leather rucksack in which he carried bait, wire, medicine, the things a trapper would have. With forty pounds more in the pack he left the runway and covering his tracks by walking on logs, on bare rock, on chunks and places that took no sign of a moccasin's pressure, he returned to the high-line blazed along the crest of the range through the timber and at the No. 3 cabin rehid the gold dust. In the early morning he headed for Paydirt with it on his back.

Manager Dren had come to town to meet him for a preliminary report on the outlook of the trapline project. Slipping into town along alleys and in the night, Durango reached the Chief's room and lowered his rucksack with a little thud that showed the metal weight.

"Boy!" Drenn exclaimed, "You've brought it out—"

"Half of it, I reckon." Durango could not wholely keep the exultation out of his voice.

Dren picked up the pokes which had been made out of the tough leg skin of a wild horse, holding them one in each big, stubby hand.

"We get a nice bonus on this recovery," he remarked. "How about the rest of it, do you think?"

Durango described the hideout and the looks of it. Of course, after the split, the other two had hidden their pokes, probably close to the cabin than Lefty Dermat had his. If the authorities went in with a posse they could probably capture the outfit.

"You did pretty well in eight days," Chief Drenn smiled. "Want to go back —Do you think it's worth while?"

"I was just lucky, Chief," Durango hesitated. "I might spot the other caches, though. Lefty's going to be plenty indignant when he finds he has been double-crossed. It'll depend on where his suspicions fall. I'd better go take another look, I think."

"All right," Drenn assented. "How about that nester Bovant—What is he?"

"He shuffles around and the other three snarl at him and he jumps," Durango answered. "Every few minutes he wipes his nose on the back of his hand. He shaves every Sunday, real particular, though."

"I reckon that covers him," Drenn chuckled. "Looks like we can do better watching their den than trying to smoke them out."

"I feel that way," Durango said, and headed back for the high-line, Drenn's warning ringing in his ears.

"Lefty'll sure be wild when he finds his cache empty; he'll be looking all over for you, who done it, Mister!"

Every one in Paydirt, probably, knew High-Line Flint had turned his trapping country over to a stranger, Wess Durango, who was a newcomer in those parts. Word of that should get to the nester outfit up the creek any day. The minute he heard about it, Lefty Dermat was going to take a look at his cache and figure things over as regards his partners and that newcomer along the Pekan Ridge, which was as near the Bovant outfit to the cache. In his rage, Dermat would draw down his gun on any one just for the sake of killing to ease his feelings—unless he figured he could get his gold nuggets back. That might hold his trigger finger for a while.

THERE were a hundred places in the sixty miles or so of trail along the mountain back where a bushwhacker could lie and get the drop on the trapper, without a chance of escape. The shadows would hide, the sun would reveal, and luck would decide who would get the first look. Durango circled clear around No. 1 camp before entering it. All the next day, wherever he could be kept off the line trail, watching the ground for footprints of hobnailed boots, approaching the ridgeback trapper runway. But no one had been there, nor had No. 2 camp been found. All around it were twigs and poles and cunning tricks would have betrayed if any visitor had come that way.

No. 3 camp opposite the Bovant nesting outfit was the dangerous point. Flint had hidden his log-and-stone cabin down the north side of a spring in a dense hemlock thicket on a timbered bench. To reach it the trapper dropped over the side to a spur and followed along a flat bottom hollow along the mountain side where one would get into a wind-suck draft from the cabin. When Durango reached this, fresh fire smoke struck his

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nostrils. Some one was in his camp!

Dusk was near, the temperature had fallen below freezing, and the two burros in their beaver meadow pasture showed no sign of having had visitors. It was too late to find out whether the intruder or intruders were from the back of the mountain or if they had come up out of Pekan valley on the south side or if they had come out of the Desolation itself.

A real trapper, not quite aware of the population through there would just naturally go on into camp. A detective knowing his peril had to do some figuring. Durango swung down his pack with some town-grub in it, changed from his hunting boots into soft-soled moccasins and made sure of his rifle. He got his 45-Six handy for business, though he left his 22-caliber bait pistol in his belt holster, maintaining his role of wildcrafter. Then he slipped through the trackless timber to come in sight of the hidden cabin in its thicket.

His light was burning but the curtains were drawn, screens he had hung himself against just this thing he was now doing. He heard the clink of frying pan and sound of kettle put on the fire. There were two men getting supper. Perhaps they were just passersby. He sat down to watch the cabin door.

When it opened and one of the men came out, he could have a chance to see and identify them; whether they were strangers passing by or if they were men he knew. Cold, sweaty after his 16 mile tramp under a 45-pound pack along the skyline, he simply had to endure the discomfort. And he had been only a few minutes in the ambush up the saddleback when a twig cracked in the open timber. Then a faint scratch of a nailhead on a stone was followed by the soft craunch of a foot on dry pine needle and twig forest litter.

Some one else was circling around the thicket in which the cabin had been built. This man came within twenty feet of Durango and stood behind a tree looking into the gloom toward the faint glow made by the flames under the big stone fireplace and at the pin-points here and there where the light within shone through at a window, at a crack in the door, and through a tiny hole in the log chinking.

A tall man, silhouetted against the grey-pink of the cabin, the newcomer leaned and peered, cocked his ears to listen, stooped low with his head stretched out wolf-like around the tree. First on one side, then the other of the huge trunk, his rifle over his right arm elbow. When he was out where Durango could see, the man carried a big gun in its scabbard on his left side.

"Lefty Dermat!" Durango recognized.

THE outlaw was crouched down, tense and bitter, his every line displaying his anger, hate, merciless intentions. After all the outlaws must have known about that trapline and hunted out the cabins, ready to use them should the need come. Gone was the chill, forgotten was the feeling of resentment at the intrusion. The detective was back in his advantage now. He was seeing while remaining unseen.

Dermat had none of the Carcajou operator's patience. After only a minute or two, he headed toward the cabin, following a runway left by deer, mountain sheep, elk and other wildlife coming down to drink at the camp spring, whose outlet became a brook which the beaver had damned long ago, making the flow-ground where the burros were pastured, now. When within fifty feet of the cabin, Lefty stood his rifle against a stump and drew his revolver with his left hand, holding it loosely and Durango could see the muzzle drawing figure 8s as he advanced toward the closed door, where the latchstring hole shone bright and was blocked out when the two men within came between it and the fire or the bear-oil bitch-light on the table.

Tense with expectancy, Durango waited. Lefty might think he was after trappers—this seemed the most likely. Perhaps he was just looking in on strangers. He was hunting—his every motion was that of a killer after victims. The detective got his rifle pointed for he could not let that scoundrel shoot strangers down—whoever they might be! Covered from behind—no telling what Lefty Dermat would do when called upon to "Hands Up!"

Then a queer thing happened. A martin came running in hops down the

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mountain and ran into the scent of the outlaw, turned and leaped in sudden panic at the nearest tree. It struck the rifle and knocked it over, and when the weapon struck the ground it went off—Lefty Dermat had left it cocked, a fool thing to do.

The shot, crackling like high-power powder in the silence seemed a hundred times louder than ordinary. It startled Durango, and for a moment he could not think just what had happened though he had seen the silhouette of the little, squirrel-like mountain weasel leap in its alarm.

At the shot, the skulker straightened up, lifting his elbows and uttered a gasping, "Oh-ah!", standing for an instant in rigid paralysis, and Durango thought it was the rasping surprise of the shot on his nerves. The next instant he lunged ahead, lumbering toward the cabin door on the run.

Durango knelt, shaken by the excitement and rush. He had no time to think, let alone to plan. It was a split-second moment when Lefty Dermat jerked down the rawhide latchstring and flung back the split-plank door and let out the flooding golden light of the bear-oil lamp and the flaring of the fireplace flames.

The two men within had thrown themselves around to face the door and there they stood, revolvers drawn. One of the men was little, copper-haired and catty, the other a burly, black-browed fellow—and as Lefty Dermat surged into the lighted doorway, utterly reckless, they all began to shoot, the thundering shots booming in spurts out of the narrow doorway—the cabin filling with the smoke and fumes of gunpowder.

DERMAT surged over against the doorjamb with his right shoulder while he shoved his left hand ahead like a piston, like a man jabbing with his fist, first at one, then at the other of the two men who became but shadows in the blue fog that filled the little cabin.

Durango heard bullets coming by through the doorway—bullets that screamed and smacked where they hit the standing timber—and he flopped down on the ground behind the tree that hid him, until the firing ceased and he heard the terrible, choking, gurgling sounds that men make when they are hit in the chest.

Then he looked and saw Dermat still leaning against the jamb, but his legs were buckling under him. His left hand dangled down and his revolver—a big new 45-Six with a long barrel—dropped to the doorsill. The outlaw braced himself, jerked himself erect, and then lost his balance and fell over backward. In the cabin more distinctly sounded a scuffling and stirring around, with gulping sounds.

The detective, keeping out of the bright glowing light shining through the narrow doorway, drew near and leaned to look inside. On the floor in each of the back corners in the nich left by the walls of the fire place was a prostrate man, one quite dead and the other in his final quiver.

Durango heard the echoes of the firing die away and only the faint sounds of the night remained, the call of an owl, the wind in the pine tops moaning, the far-thunder of the mountains shrinking in the cold and the tinkling music of fairy bells of ice frozen on blades of grass dipping in and out of the spring run current and striking one another.

On the plank table were the two squat pokes of gold dust loot.

Detective Wess Durango took the bags of nuggets down to the two burros in the old beaver meadow. He packed one of the animals and headed along the high-line on the Pekan mountain range on his way back to Paydirt. The case was closed.

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TWO NOVELS

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Manhunter

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

MURDERS were no novelty whatever to Twistaway Smith. In upward of six years in the Rangers, he had witnessed or investigated a score or more. So he was apt to take a calm, very practical, view of the ordinary murder and, instead of moralizing, look to the steps that would quickest set the murderer behind bars.

But on the morning that he stood in old Judge Ambrose's house in Perryton, over the brutally murdered bodies of the old Judge and Mrs. Ambrose, his attitude of calm detachment deserted him, quite. Not only was this a peculiarly barbarous crime of vengeance, but the Judge had been Twistaway's good friend for years. As for Mrs. Ambrose, the whole countryside knew her as "Mother."

So Twistaway gathered up such facts as study of the premises and examination of the ancient Mexican house-man provided. There was no mystery about the identity of the murderers—they were the brothers Gonzales, Rafael and Pablo. They had slipped into the house, overpowered the house-man, told him calmly who they were and that it was their purpose to kill the Judge and his wife, to avenge the insult inflicted upon them when Judge Ambrose sentenced them to jail for disturbing the peace.

Going down to the telegraph office to wire the captain of his company, Twistaway reflected that, while he knew little more of the brothers Gonzales than did the sheriff of the county, that little was important. For a wandering Mexican rider had informed Twistaway casually, well before the crime, that Rafael and Pablo were the nephews of one Gato Gonzales, a prominent Mexican in Vado County, down on the Border.

So, to his telegram to the captain, in which he asked permission to follow the murderers, Twistaway added a wire to the sheriff of Vado County, describing the fugitives and warning the officer that they had been seen riding south and riding hell-for-leather. Undoubtedly, Twistaway telegraphed, they were looking for sanctuary along the River; were expecting assistance from their uncle.

There was no reply from the sheriff of Vado; Twistaway had hardly expected one. But from his superior officer came a curt message—Judge Ambrose had been a particular friend of Captain Haines, also:

"Get them."

That was all. Merely the accepted

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motto of the Texas Rangers.

TWISTAWAY came riding fast down to Vado County, pretty certain that he was on the trail of the murderers, but unable to find any trace of them. Nearing his destination, he came south through the little valley of Coyote Creek, with the Dwarfs' squat, greenish-brown peaks and ridges on his right, the towering heights of the Altos on the left.

Along Coyote Creek itself he saw cattle branded Triangle Bar and Quarter-Circle M, so he judged that the swift, clear mountain stream formed the boundary of these two cow-outfits. There appeared a house on his left in mid-afternoon—a long, low adobe with cottonwood log corrals nearby, set upon a low bench of the Altos. Studying it through the glasses, Twistaway saw no life. He decided against turning aside and went on until dark, making camp, then, to one side of the trail.

Sometime after midnight, Twistaway found himself suddenly awake. He lay quietly, with hand upon the unholstered Colt at his side, listening. There was the dull fall of hoofs upon the soft earth of the creek-trail a hundred yards below his camp. He wondered who the travelers could be. Men from that ranch on the lower slopes of the Altos? Probably, but—this was not the country in which one took anything much for granted. He kept quiet.

"Meet me by moonlight alone
And then I will tell you a tale.
Must be told by the moonlight alone
In the grave at the end of the
vale . . ."

It was a plaintive tenor voice singing and only one verse of the song did he sing. Twistaway wondered about the singer, but as the horsemen passed on, he pulled up the blanket about him and once more went to sleep.

Early the next morning, a few miles along the trail brought him to the end of the scrub timber along the creek and to the edge of a vast yellow plain, studded with grease wood, mesquite, ocotilla and cactus. Through the glasses he could make out the glint of the River, lying like a polished blade in a narrow strip of green *bosque*. And to the right was a town of some size—Vado, that must be.

The trail forded the creek and led off across the plain toward the town. Presently, he came upon a dingy adobe house beside the sandy track. Twistaway reined in and his faded blue eyes twinkled as he read the sign scrawled across the peeling plaster of the front, telling of everything in the world to sell at the cheapest possible prices—

A wizened little Mexican came to the door and stared at the lean, shabby figure on the tall, screw-tailed sorrel. Twistaway pushed back the battered black Stetson upon his sandy hair and grinned at the storekeeper:

"Am I far behind the others?" he asked, partly from idle curiosity and partly from inbred caution to learn something of the men who had passed his camp along the way he was traveling.

"They should be in Vado, now, señor," shrugged the Mexican. "They did not stop here, but I heard them riding past before dawn. I knew it was the men of the Triangle Bar when I heard the señor Jones singing of the moonlight."

"I need tobacco, *amigo mio,*" said Twistaway, smiling inwardly. "*Two sacks.*"

He was still grinning when the storekeeper brought out the two bags of Durham.

VADO was rather larger than the average Border town, but that constituted its only difference. There were the usual sandy streets between rows of one-story adobe buildings set a little apart from each other — as the trail reached them it widened and became the principal street, lined with saloons, gambling rooms, general stores and dwellings. Ditches brought water from the River, that bounded Vado on the southern edge.

There was a plaza with clumps of dusty cottonwoods here and there upon its hardbeaten expanse, with the town's main ditch running along one side of it, over which flattened logs served as footbridges here and there. Across from the plaza was Vado's single building of more than one story—the Star Hotel, a long

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structure with a frame second story built upon an older ground story of adobe.

As Twistaway rode past the plaza, glancing at the great cottonwood upon which were tacked handwritten notices of many varieties, a dark, slender man came through the doorway of the hotel saloon. Mechanically, Twistaway studied his face and, even with almost the width of the street between them, he found the man's features sinister. It seemed to him that the dark, steady eyes, turned absently his way, were the coldest and the cruelest he had seen for many a long day.

He was dandified to the extreme, this slender fellow. His shirt was snowy white—of linen or silk; he wore a necktie such as Twistaway had once seen upon the neck of a wandering artist up Bandera-way, a necktie of vividest scarlet; his trousers were of a dark, pinstriped woolen and tucked ever so neatly into the tops of mirrorbright punchers' boots. He wore no visible weapon.

"In-ter-est-in'!" commented Twistaway to himself. "I see a couple jiggers like him once, an' gen'rally, the' was hell apoppin' amongst the neighborhood before they cashed in. . . ."

The slender man partly turned, as if in answer to words behind him. His white teeth flashed. Two other men came through the door and minutely Twistaway observed them, while seeming to be engrossed in the study of the hotel's staggering sign.

One was a thin faced and hooknosed man as dark as the man they joined. He also, was more carefully, more neatly, garbed than the average cowpuncher. As he moved a little, something twinkled upon his unbuttoned vest—a badge. The third man seemed no more than a boy of late 'teens. He was in overalls, one leg in, one leg over his shabby boot tops, his hair showed towy-white beneath the flapping brim of an ancient Stetson; his shirt was open at the lean throat. And, low upon his thighs, the holster-toes held down by thongs, were two long Colts.

It was hard for Twistaway to see this youth's face clearly. He was never still for a half-minute at a time; always he kept something at his back—the doorfacing, the wall. But he was brown as a weathered saddle and his eyes glinted oddly light against tanned cheeks.

"All the brands o' the killer. . . ." Twistaway muttered to himself, out of long habit. "Still yuh can't tell by lookin' down a mule's ear how much he'll heft. . . ."

And he turned Abraham, the sad-faced sorrel, across the street and rode around the corner of the hotel to the corral in the rear, where a Mex' hostler came to see to the animal. When Abraham had been set out ear corn, Twistaway went into the crowded hotel parlor, an inconspicuous, shuffling figure that melted naturally with the motley groups and attracted not the least attention.

THE trio were gone from the barroom doorway when he sauntered that way. So he strolled out and began casually to look for the sheriff's office. He had no desire to publish his interest in that place, hence he asked no questions. So it was that before he found it, he came to the river bank, directly opposite the Mexican village, across shallow expanse of the water, called by Vadoans "Southtown."

Squarely upon the river bank where Twistaway walked was a long whitewashed adobe building, with several doors in the streetwall. "*Guillermo Gonzales*" was the sign he read above a door at the end, and he hesitated.

It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that this Gonzales' nephews, the brothers Rafael and Pablo, had taken refuge with their uncle. He had no means of knowing if Sheriff Howells had yet received his telegram and even if the sheriff was looking in this neighborhood for the murderers, they might still be in these premises. Getting a hidden Mexican criminal out of a Mexican settlement was like extracting a prairie dog from a village.

Both the brothers knew Twistaway by sight, as he knew them. It was his way to spy out the lay of things before acting, and if they were really in hiding here, they would be alert and watchful, with all the advantage. At last, he shrugged and crossed the threshold of the last door but one. He found himself in a long, dusky room, filled with all the helter-skelter array of merchandise

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common to a Mexican general store.

There was nobody in sight when he stopped and let his eyes grow accustomed to the gloom. But from somewhere came the murmur of voices. Soundlessly, yet cautious not to move like an eavesdropper, lest someone should be watching him, Twistaway moved down the room, staring at saddle blankets, at strings of red chilis, at anything that met his eyes on the long counter or hanging overhead.

So he came almost opposite a door in the thick wall that opened, it seemed, into a barroom beyond. The voices were clearer, now.

Apparently, there were several Mexicans talking. At least, the tongue used was Spanish.

"Howells never saw the message. I told you that, Gato. And so he rode off, to see if the word of men camping in the *malpais* at the end of the Dwarfs was true. He wanted me to go, but I was very ill. So he went alone. He said that there was no time to lose if he was to catch these robbers."

The men laughed. Twistaway studied the pattern of a gaudy blanket and blessed the impulse that had brought him inside.

"I did not think Señor Howells could trouble me particularly—" this was a deeper voice "—even if you gave him the telegram. If he had come to me, I should have said that I had no nephews. He must have taken my word!"

"I wired Perryton to ask if an officer had been sent down this way after them—" the voice was that of the first speaker. "The sheriff there answered that he had sent nobody. I was certain that he had not—Perryton is a long way from Vado—but I knew you would wish to be sure."

"You wired the sheriff at Perryton?" grunted the deep voice, and the listener at the other side of the door knew it must be Gato Gonzales who spoke—"What was his name?"

"J. Crowley—His reply only now came to me—I was bringing it to you when I met Jones and—er—Brown here. So they—"

"Let me see again that first telegram to Sheriff Howells," pursued Gonzales suavely.

A BRIEF pause followed. Then Gonzales spoke again, and now his tone was hard and cutting.

"You do not observe well, Monte. This first telegram is signed by Smith—F. Smith. And it happens that I know Señor Smith. He is a Ranger, and Rangers are not ordered to go here and there by county sheriffs. More than that, he was a very good friend of this Judge. Suppose the Ranger Smith follows his telegram—what then?"

"Smith! 'Twistaway' Smith?" A third voice broke in snarlingly. "I hope he *does* come here! He will never leave Vado! I have a score to settle with him."

And abruptly the furious voice slipped into English, cursing with a flat monotony that was deadly-sounding.

"You—have met this Ranger, this Smith?" Gato Gonzales inquired.

"No! I have never seen him. But he killed my best friend a year ago! I will kill him on sight. But not until I have told him why; have let him try to draw—knowing all the while that he is too slow! I—"

"Sure yuh will!" someone said soothingly in English. "Sure yuh will. But don't holler it to the world, *amigo!*"

There was a rustling behind the counter on Twistaway's left. He turned alertly, but with face blank, as a sharp, old-young face rose from behind its edge and small, close-set black eyes bored suspiciously into his. It was a hunchbacked boy of indeterminate age, hardly taller, even when upon his feet, than the counter.

"What do you desire?" he demanded in Spanish.

"Tobacco," Twistaway replied in English, moving his feet noisily upon the rough wooden floor and developing a slight, but noticeable limp as he moved toward the counter. Also, stooping shoulders greatly reduced his lean six feet of height and a gentle humility, almost, that marvelously softened his weathered, high-cheekboned face, loosening the thin, straight line of his mouth, made of him a different figure than that which had entered the *tienda*.

"Do you wish smoking tobacco or plug for the eating?" the hunchback asked, his foxy face still alight with suspicion

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which—Twistaway devoutly trusted—was perhaps no more than instinctive.

"Tobacco!" Twistaway said again. He made the motions of rolling a cigarette, then beamed upon the boy and waited.

He was conscious that he was being watched from the barroom door, but he paid for a sack of Durham and made a cigarette from it before turning that way. He was wondering whether it were wiser to turn and try to go straight out of the store, or brazen the thing out by going into the barroom for a drink. He decided in favor of boldness. And in the doorway stood that dark, slender man of cruel black eyes whom he had seen in the hotel door. . . .

"Howdy!" grinned Twistaway. "Smells like somethin' to drink in yonder an' me an' the smell, we just fall in together like twins at a reunion."

There was no answering smile on the dark man's face. Nor did he trouble to return the greeting by so much as a nod. Twistaway pretended not to see, but came limping cheerfully on toward the door and at the last minute the man moved aside to let him enter.

INSIDE the little barroom a huge, grizzled Mexican stood behind the bar, with thick fingers tugging at the end of a ropy, coal-black mustache. His little eyes were murkily unreadable; his heavy features changeless as so much putty. Before the bar, staring steadily in his direction, Twistaway found the other two of the hotel doorway—the white-haired boy and the hooknosed man with badge upon his vest.

"Howdy!" he grinned at them. "If the's no objectin', why—what'll yuh-all have, gents?"

"What is it that you desire?" asked Gato Gonzales in Spanish.

Twistaway listened with a little helpless shrug and a patient, resigned smile, turning to the three silent men.

"I swear, I'm all frazzled out tryin' to git these folks down here to talk white folks' talk. Ever' time I want a sack o' Bull, or a snack to plaster my insides with, or just to find out how the trails head, I got to make more signs than a sick war-whoop! Do one o' yuh gents that talks the lingo mind tellin' me what his powwow's about?"

Long they stared at him and silently, too. He waited without change in his meekly expectant expression. At last the hooknosed man, who wore a deputy sheriff's star, seemed to slacken his tense pose.

"He ask' yuh what yuh wanted to drink," he said.

Twistaway stared speculatively at Gato and shook his head:

"All that talkin' to say, 'What'll it be?' " he cried. "Well, gents, belly up! One thing I shore have learned in my ramblin's an' that is that from the Little Beaver—which is as fur as ever I got to the Nawth—clean down to this-here Ryo Grande, liquor's liquor no matter what kind o' talk the barkeep slugs! Drink her down, gents!"

He kept up his chattering, playing perfectly the not-too-bright puncher glad to be in company with his own kind, once more. And the places he mentioned carelessly, yet with a wealth of local allusions that proved his first-hand knowledge of them, were scattered from the Bad Lands of the Little Missouri down past the Nations and all over Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah and California.

The white-haired boy of sullen, suspicious brown face said little or nothing. But both he and the thin, dark, cruel-eyed man seemed to have lost their suspicion of the stranger. As for Gato Gonzales, Twistaway thought that no one could ever guess by his blank face what his thoughts might be.

"Figure to settle here?" inquired the deputy sheriff finally. "Reckon yuh could use another hand, Moonlight?" He turned to the dark, dandified man.

"Nah! I got plenty men. Dam' Triangle Bar's plumb eat up with loafin' punchers now. Me an' Brown, here, we could do all the work durin' the year, an' one more man to help with the brandin' would be plenty. An' the's Curly Otwright an' Whitey Gore besides us."

"I ain't partic'lar about settlin' around here, nohow," grinned Twistaway. "I been figurin' mebbe I'd drift into Ol' Mexico for a spell, just to kind o' see what-for a country she is."

"Mebbe Gonzales, here, can give yuh

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a job," the deputy grinned, with a half-malicious, half-amused side glance at the motionless Mexican. "Gato's got a li'l ranch west o' Southtown. It'd be hard work, though; Gato, he'll brand as many as five calves, lots o' years—good years, o' course. . . ."

GONZALES ignored the deputy's attempts at humor. Twistaway, while he grinned, was trying to establish a certain connection in his mind. It had been this silent, sullen, boy-gunman here who had threatened to shoot him on sight for killing his "friend." That "friend" must have been the halfbreed Ad' Shultz, killed over on the Vaca by a posse led by Twistaway, when he and two others, robbers of a country store, had holed up and resisted arrest. But, who was this ordinary-looking boy?

They had another drink, bought, this time, by the man called "Moonlight." Then Twistaway yawned and lazily made a cigarette.

"Reckon I'll drift around an' look yo' town over," he drawled.

"Where yuh stoppin'?" asked the deputy.

"Down in the corral back o' that-there Star Hotel," he grinned. "I ain't got money to chunk away at the road-runners, so I reckon I'll push my hawss over an' take half his bed! Well, see yuh some more, gents!"

And he got out, limping carefully, feeling their eyes trained upon his back.

As he strolled along he mulled over what he had learned in Gonzales' place. A deputy sheriff whose face was of that sort which Twistaway had the impulse to smash—for no specific reason whatever; who schemed to hoodwink Sheriff Howells, his superior; who stood in with three men Twistaway suspected might be guilty of almost anything; who helped to prevent the capture of two known murderers—the brothers Gonzales. . . .

This, alone, was enough to occupy an average Ranger-sergeant's thoughts, but in addition, he smelled something in the air, with the congregating of that trio in Gonzales' place.

The barroom of the Star was, apparently, the business-exchange of Vado, and hither Twistaway betook himself. Here merchants met each other and arrangements for mutual shipments were made; lawyers and their clients discussed cases; bankers and freighters, the town's one editor; the mayor and a couple of city fathers—all were here. And above the individual discussions, talk of the next month's election was the engrossing overtone. Moving his glass in circles upon the bar, Twistaway listened to fragments of a half-dozen conversations, seeking the key to the puzzle he faced.

"The trouble with Howells"—this was a white-haired man in carefully brushed legal black—"is that he is a bulldog, not a fox. Put him on a trail and he will follow it forever, or until he gets his men. But some one else must figure for him whether or not it is the right trail! Analysis, deduction—these are beyond Howells."

"Monte Montgomery is certainly aspiring to his boss's job!" replied another lawyerish-looking man at Twistaway's elbow. "Haven't you noticed how he manages to convey the impression that if *he* were sheriff—or even a deputy not hampered by a thick-headed superior—he would land these criminals who have been raiding the locality for the last year?"

"Why not try a swap, this election, Judge"—it was the man at Twistaway's side addressing the white-haired man who had analyzed the sheriff's deficiencies—"and run Jack Bridges for sheriff and Howells for city marshal? Bridges can think as well as shoot. He's a damned good marshal and he'll be a better sheriff, while Howells will be a good marshal, too, because the job doesn't require so much, covering, as it does, only the town."

"If Bridges recovers from his wounds in time, I approve of the idea," nodded the Judge. "But he's still badly crippled. Well, we'll see, gentlemen."

WHEN he moved toward the door, nodding constantly to acquaintances, Twistaway limped after him. On the street, he overtook the dignified, slow-moving figure and asked for a match.

"I don't really need it, Judge," he said in a low tone. "But it'll be better not for yuh to know me right now.

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"Where can I talk to yuh off in a corner?"

The Judge's keen black eyes roved shrewdly over this shabby cowboy as slowly, with much fishing in pocket after pocket, he hunted the match. Then he nodded:

"I live in that white-plastered house, a hundred yards down the street—the house with the shrubbery before it. There is a back door gained through a walled yard. It is—used rather often by those who confer with me. . . ."

Fifteen minutes later Twistaway slipped inside the yard and came to the door. The Judge was standing in the gloom inside and he led the way to a cool room in the front. At its door he stood aside courteously to let Twistaway enter.

"I'm takin' a chanct, Judge," Twistaway said quickly." My name's Smith an' I' happen to be a sergeant in the Rangers. I'm down here after a couple o' Mex' killers that murdered Judge Ambrose up in Perryton. Reckon yuh heard about that killin'?"

"I did!" the Judge replied very grimly. "And anything that I can do to help you, I shall count it a pleasure as well as a duty, to do. The Ambroses were my good friends when I practiced law in Fort Worth, years ago. I have read the account of the murder in brief form. Who are these Mexicans? Why do you think they came here?"

"They're Gato Gonzales' nephews an' they hit straight south after the murder."

"The devil! If *only* I had known that three days ago! I was visiting Gonzales one evening—with a warning, as it happened, concerning the use of foreign Mexicans in the coming election. . . . And into the barroom where we talked, came two young Mexicans whom I had never seen before in this section. Not *pelados* but evidently of the better class. Gonzales almost looked worried. He waved them back into the inner room and told me—quite unnecessarily, for I asked no questions—a long rigamarole about them. He said that they were the sons of a boyhood friend of his; that they were from Old Mexico and were going back shortly."

"Well, yuh prob'ly saw Rafael an' Pablo. Good-lookin' boys—an' meaner'n hell! I put my foot in my hand an' come 'lopin' right after 'em."

"Why didn't you notify our sheriff to be on the lookout for them?"

"I did!" Twistaway said drily. "An' yo' precious hooknose' deputy sher'ff, he hid out the telegram on Howells an' galloped right down to pass the news along to Gato Gonzales. I ambled intuh Gato's big house down yonder, an' 'fore they knew anyone was round, I heerd 'em talkin'. I went in to size-up who they was an' found 'em all together—Gato, Monte an' Jones, besides a white-haired boy packin' two guns that's goin' to kill me on sight when he knows who I am. He hangs out with Montgomery an' Moonlight Jones o' the Triangle Bar."

The Judge stared his interest and surprise.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Do'no', ex-actly. Gi' me the lay o' the land. Ain't yuh-all suspicioned this Montgomery none?"

"Well, it may be that some of us have thought his actions a little peculiar. Hmm! Montgomery and Jones are thick with Gato Gonzales, you say. Monte used to ride for Jones, who owns the Triangle Bar, before someone talked Howells into appointing him a deputy. And there is another man who intends to kill you?"

"NOT because o' this deal; seems I tromped on his toes a while back, by bein' head o' the posse that killed his pardner. Happens I'm the only man close enough to've killed Ad' Shultz that can prove he never did, him bein' drilled with a .41 bullet. But that don't matter! This kid Brown is goin' to untie his wolf at me—soon's he knows who I am."

"The Triangle Bar's reputation is—just between us—not of the best. Quite a number of Quarter-Circle M, TXT, Heart and other cows and horses have disappeared in the past year. Jones claims to have lost stock, too, but while some of the other ranchers have been hard hit by their losses, he remains prosperous. . . . I have wondered about this peculiarity."

"Who d' yuh reckon's at the foot o' this wholesale robbin' an' other crimes here at Vado I been hearin' about?"

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"Montgomery claims it must be a gang from over the Line—over in the *malpais* west of the Dwarfs. . . ." But the Judge's eyes twinkled as he spoke.

"I come down here for nothin' but to git me them Mexicans," Twistaway said deliberately. "But the way Moonlight Jones an' this-here Monte Montgomery make me feel—an' Gato Gonzales, too—I would not be heartbroke if I was to find that the bad eggs o' yo' county was in the same basket with my two. . . ."

"*Just* what I was wondering!" cried the Judge, sitting up straight in his chair. "If we could get rid of Gonzales and Jones and entirely discredit Montgomery—if no more—it would be a wonderful thing for Vado County. What will you do if we learn that the nephews are across the river?"

"Git 'em," Twistaway said simply. "All I want to know is where they are."

"The way things move now, in Washington and Austin, that may get your job."

"I figured that," said Twistaway calmly. "An' if they want to cut off my head, after I git the Gonzaleses, a' right! But—Judge Ambrose was a mighty good friend o' mine; so was Mis' Ambrose an'—yuh know I saw the bodies after. . . ."

"Was it—as bad as that?"

"Worse! Rangerin' suits me down to the ground. I have had my hopes o' bein' a captain one day. But if I have to cut loose all that, to git them Gonzales boys—why, I cut loose ever'thing but the saddlehorn."

They sat in silence for a space, each engrossed with his own ponderings. Finally the Judge lifted his eyes to Twistaway.

"I wonder if the *fiesta* will bring them out of hiding?" he said, then, in reply to Twistaway's inquiring stare. "They're having a *fiesta* across the river in Southtown tonight. It will practically move Vado to the other side and any Mex' over there who's between eight and eighty and doesn't attend will either be tied, or under a tombstone in the Campo Santo."

"Yuh say most o' Vado'll be over there?" Twistaway's faded blue eyes were narrowed.

"Lord, yes! With the ranchers for fifty miles around. It's a big celebration in this locality. Lasts three days. Most of the residents will be soaked in liquor until it's done."

"How many men did Moonlight Jones bring to town with him?"

"Two, besides the white-haired boy—Brown, you called him?"

"Which leaves on the Triangle Bar—nobody, except mebbe a cook. . . . Le' me dream about this business for a spell, Judge. I'm beginnin' to see the wiggle-tails in the rain barrel!"

He slumped in the big chair for full five minutes, his cigarette dying in his fingers, staring blindly at the floor between his boot-toes. Then he looked up at the Judge twinklingly.

"If me an' yuh, Judge, we was figurin' to turn a Vado bank, mebbe, inside out, what time would we pick for the job?"

BLANKLY the Judge stared for a second, then he smacked a hand upon his knee.

"D' you think that's the way the cat hops? By George! I do believe you're right, Smith! There couldn't be a better time than tonight. And—if our private suspicions are well-founded—they're all here, plenty for the job, aren't they? This is personally of interest to me—I'm a heavy stockholder in the Cattlemen's, the biggest bank of the county. Well, you're field marshal! What do we do?"

"The'll be five we know about. . . . More, if Gato Gonzales is supplyin' any o' his understrappers. . . . Hmm! Why, I reckon I'll kind o' have to leave it up to yuh, Judge, to git two-three good, steady men to work with me. I figure they'll go over to Southtown an' then sneak back. I figure, too, that Monte Montgomery'll be with 'em if they make a break for the bank. Reckon they'll hit for the Cattlemen's an' not for the other one?"

"*I* should choose the Cattlemen's, if I were in their place. We're notoriously old-fashioned; our vaults are antiques. Then, the building is somewhat isolated. The Merchants' Bank is smaller, but it's next door to the Acme Saloon and the Acme has an electric light plant. Too, their vaults are new and strong."

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"Sounds like the Cattlemen's," nodded Twistaway. "Now, Judge, I'm goin' to ramble around an' keep my eyes peeled this afternoon. I'll do my blamedest to see if our friends hike across the river as per specifications. An' I'll show up in yo' backyard come dark. Meanwhile, yuh can be pickin' a couple or three men to back me up."

"To back *us* up," corrected the Judge, smilingly. "I'll be one, and I expect I can still handle a double-barreled shotgun."

"Do'no anybody I'd rather have!" Twistaway said heartily, getting up. "See yuh some more, Judge. We're kind o' takin' lots of things for granted, but I got a feelin' that we ain't off trail very far."

Twistaway ate his belated noonday meal in a Chinese restaurant on Main Street; then, because that seemed the most popular rendezvous for all the town, he loafed back to the Star Hotel's barroom. It was not so crowded, now, as it had been in the late forenoon, and would be later on. Talk was in drowsy monotone. Twistaway stood alone at one end of the great bar, sipping a pony beer.

He heard foosteps across the room, entering by the door from the parlor, or lobby. Casually, instinctively, he peered under his crooked arm in that direction. And—it was a trick of his to remember feet as well as he remembered faces—he recognized the boots of the white-haired boy, who called himself Brown and who intended to kill one Twistaway Smith, sergeant of Rangers, on sight.

Slowly, he turned and grinned at the boy, observing that the brown face was murderously set, the pupils of his eyes contracted to pin points. Evidently, the killer was enraged at something—which meant s o m e b o d y. And Twistaway hooked his left elbow on the bar and grinned goodnaturedly, as he had done that morning in Gato Gonzales' place. He was ready for anything, as his right hand, bearing the inevitable brown papered cigarette, was crooked across his breast.

Nobody else in the long barroom had taken any notice of the boy's entrance. It seemed to Twistaway that the youth glanced flashingly sideways to see if they were watched. Then, slowly, he held up a folded paper and shook it open. Twistaway needed but one glance to recognize the paper—his descriptive list, bearing all details of his enlistment in the Rangers, his personal appearance, the name of the officer recruiting him and, of course, his name. . . . Every Ranger carried one.

"Yuh remember whut I said, when yuh was listenin' to us talk, at Gonzales' place this mawnin'?"

THE boy's tone, low, was thickened with fury. And when Twistaway, lean face altered subtly, still grinned amused as he nodded, he snarled at the long, seemingly, unimpressed Ranger:

"Yuh downed Ad' Shultz an' now—yuh're goin' to hell with the compliments o'—The Muchacho!"

The Machacho! Of course it was! Flashingly, almost subconsciously, while he was tensed, waiting, for the vicious little killer's next move, Twistaway called himself an idiot for not having thought of that before. But there were so many would-be gunmen of youthful age, trying to be faithful to the reputation and memory of Billy the Kid. . . .

"Oh, I reckon not," he drawled, in tone as low as the Muchacho's had been. "Yuh been hangin' out with Mex' too much, son. Reckon it's kind o' got yuh puffed up about yo' handlin' o' guns. Now, yuh know they want yuh back East, so I'll just have to warn yuh that, unless yuh give up peaceable, yuh'll never git back there—alive. . . ."

The Muchacho's furious, outraged reply was a string of oaths that jerked every eye in the barroom toward them. And he was going for his guns with hands that moved like a rattler's head, while he cursed.

Twistaway had not the slightest shade of misguided sentimentality to hamper him. This little outcast had in one way or another killed nearly twenty men and the fact that he was not yet twenty altered his warped character not a bit. He had needed killing for a long time and, while it would have been vastly preferable in every way to turn him over to the hangman for the job, that was not possible, now.

Twistaway wore his single gun low

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down on the left hip, butt to the front for a crossing right-hand draw. The breathless spectators saw then, perhaps not the fastest gunplay any there had ever witnessed, but certainly the "quick draw" performed as rapidly and accurately as was necessary forever to explode the Muchacho's lurid fame. The killer got his guns out, but the single shot he fired went into the floor as he crashed forward with a bullet through his face, one that smashed his left arm and another through the heart.

Before any of the men fancied moving forward—perhaps to run into a bullet—Twistaway slid ahead and picked up together a fallen Colt and the folded paper the Muchacho had taken from his saddlebags.

" 'S a' right," he called grimly. "He's handed in his checks." Then, as they sidled curiously toward the sprawling figure: "Reckon yuh've all heard o' him—it's El Muchacho. . . ."

Then they did gape in earnest, both at the famous "fastest gunman" and at his tall conqueror. Twistaway looked about impatiently. If he were to preserve his status of shiftless cowboy, there was some tall and skilful lying to do. It was not going to be easy to escape the clutches of Monte Montgomery, who knew—who must have known all the time—the real identity of the Muchacho.

And through the front door came the welcome figure of the Judge, with thumbs hooked in the lower pockets of his flowered waistcoat—which pockets might or might not contain a pair of the wicked, stubby little weapons known as derringers. . . .

"Hi-yah, Judge!" called Twistaway eagerly. "I heard yuh was livin' in Vado these days an' I'm right glad to see yuh ag'in. Yuh remember me—Williams, that yuh used to know in Fo't Worth?"

"Of course I remember you, Mr. Williams," nodded the Judge. "What is this?"

"THIS is El Muchacho. He come in a minute ago an' I spoke him civil, but he was on the prod about somethin' or other an' when I answered him back, he busted out a-cussin' an' went for his hardware. I had to down him."

"The Muchacho!" repeated the Judge, staring downward. "Hmm! That explains a good many things, now doesn't it . . . I wonder if it—complicates matters any. . . . There's a reward on his head, I recall. Twenty-five hundred dollars, dead or alive. Well, Mr. Williams, I think that this will be very simply arranged. All these gentlemen saw the episode, I take it."

"We did that!" a big freighter cried enthusiastically. "An', Judge! She was plumb neat! The Muchacho had both guns half-out before I see this feller's hand move. Then he beat him to the draw an' put three .45's into him before the Muchacho could git his hammers back. An' he started the row, too! Not that that'd make no difference now, him bein' a dirty murderer."

Running feet outside preceded the entrance of Monte Montgomery, accompanied by Moonlight Jones of the Triangle Bar. They stopped short inside the door, each with hand on gun-butt. Jones' face was set, but expressionless. Montgomery seemed uncertain—either of what he was to find, or the identity of the dead man.

"What's this?" he demanded imperatively, for the body was hidden from him by the steadily-augmented group of sensation-hunters. "Somebody said the' was a shootin' in here!"

"There was," the Judge told him thoughtfully. "My friend, Mr. Williams, here, was forced to kill the noted outlaw, El Muchacho. . . ."

"Muchacho! Williams!" gasped the deputy. "Why—why—"

"This is my cowboy an' his name's Brown!" snapped Moonlight Jones. "Who says he's a outlaw?"

"I reckon 't was me, Mister," said Twistaway, meekly. "Yuh see, he come huntin' trouble an' when he got riled up, he says he's El Muchacho an' before I even had time to git scared, he unlimbered. O' course, then, the' wasn't nothin' to do but beat him to it, so I done that."

"It sounds mighty fishy to me!" snarled Jones. "Mighty fishy!"

"Pardon me for interrupting," the Judge smiled suavely. "But just now, this is in the nature of an official investigation, Mr. Jones. And in view of my official capacity and that of Montgomery,

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it is our task to do the investigating. Later, perhaps, we will call upon you for such information as you may have."

Twistaway gave credit to the little man as calmly he continued to smile at the distorted face of the rancher.

"Now," the Judge turned briskly to Montgomery, "if it seems to you that I am correct, suppose we settle first the question which will automatically settle all others: That is the question of the identity of the dead man."

"Listen!" Twistaway broke in. "Yuh'd ought to be able to read his brand real easy, Sher'ff! Well-knowed an' wanted, like he was, ever' marshal an' sher'ff in three-four states has got a reward on him. The's shore one in yo' office."

"There must be!" nodded the Judge. "Send for your file of notices, Montgomery, so that we can look them over!"

Montgomery paled a little; his small eyes roved as in search of guidance.

"I don't remember none on him," he mumbled. " 'Course, I heard a lot about him. . . ."

"Jimmy!" the Judge called to the big freighter. "Jump around the corner, will you, to Marshal Bridges' office. He keeps the circulars in the righthand upper drawer of his desk. Bring the file, will you!"

"EVEN if he is El Muchacho—" this was Moonlight Jones. "—I don't *sabe* this business a-tall. How-come yuh could git the drop on him?"

"Ever'body, most has his gifts," Twistaway said easily. "Now, some folks can sing an' some plays the pianner in dance-halls. They do'no' how-come they can do such. Me, I can git a hawg-laig out an' smokin' without havin' to be notified more'n a week ahead in writin'."

"And, after all, Mr. Jones," the Judge smiled benignantly, "you must see that such a question as yours, while it doubtless possesses a certain academic interest to the propounder, has no specific implication here. I can vouch for my friend, Mr. Williams, as possessed of the happy talent he mentions."

And while the half-understanding Jones glared uncertainly, the freighter came back with a handful of circulars, waving one as he came.

"It's him, all right! Here's his picture on it. Twenty-five hund'd dollars reward, dead or alive, if dead a picture an' affidavits to be sent as proof."

"Which seems to settle our initial question, which, in turn, settles any others that might possibly be raised," beamed the Judge, and slowly Montgomery nodded. But neither he nor Moonlight Jones seemed pleased, or even easy of mind.

Dusk came draggingly.

Twistaway had spent most of the afternoon in merely keeping out of sight, for Vado was curious about the man who had been faster on the draw than El Muchacho. But as it wore on toward supper-time, more and more Vadoans crossed the River to Southtown, to be forehanded in beginning the *fiesta*. The sandy thoroughfares of the town became deserted.

He ate at the same Chinese restaurant which had furnished him dinner and grimly speculated concerning the possible events of the night. It was possible, quite possible, that he was partly in error about Gato Gonzales, Moonlight Jones and the deputy Montgomery. But only in part, at worst.

They might not be responsible for all the crimes of violence—including murder—from which Vado County had suffered for a year with no knowledge of the perpetrators. They might intend nothing tonight; might have ridden across the River, as he had seen them ride an hour before, only to have a spree among the Mexicans.

"But Montgomery'd never admit he helped Gato cover up them murderers like he did, if they hadn't all been mixed up together in somethin' shady," Twistaway reasoned, as he had reasoned from the first. "An' this-here *fiesta* is made to order to let 'em pull a job over here in Vado. . . . Besides if I have to go over the River, it'd be kinder nice to know just where these fellers stand."

He took no chances on being shadowed after he left the restaurant. Into the darkness of the side-streets he went swiftly and silently, moving like a shadow among shadows around the corners of the adobe houses that were set helter-skelter in unfenced lots. A full square away from the Judge's back yard, he crouched beside a barrel at a house-cor-

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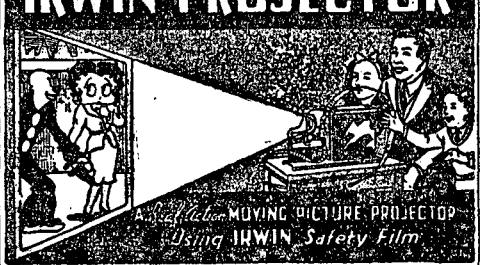

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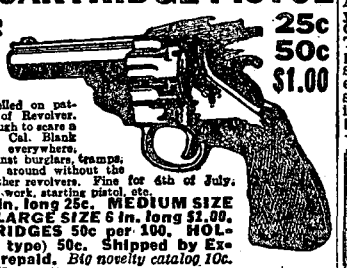

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ner for ten long minutes. Then he slid around the corner and gained the entrance to the walled yard.

Shadows moved there. The Judge spoke in a low voice. Twistaway slid over to him:

"All ready?" he grunted.

"All ready. This is Jim Toomey. You met him in the Star when he went after the reward notices. And here's Tom Hopkins of the TXT, who's like me, a stockholder in the bank. I've told them who you are."

"Good enough!" said Twistaway. "Now, I reckon we better git up to the bank an' squat. Judgin' from the racket I could hear as I come out o' my restaurant, ever'thing's goin' in Southtown. Most o' the Vado folks that're goin' are gone, I reckon."

WHEN they came to the squat, silent hulk of the bank—standing isolated save for a small adobe dwelling separated by ten feet of hardpacked earth from one side wall of it—Twistaway turned to the Judge:

"I been thinkin' about this business considerable. We could git inside an' give 'em hell when they try to bust in. But she'd be apt to end up in a fight that would see most o' us cashed in—close quarters thataway. 'T would be easy enough, o' course, to keep 'em from gittin' in But we'd have no proof o' who done it. So, I figure that if we lie off a li'l way an' let 'em git started bustin' in, then come up, we'll be safest an' surest."

"But how will we know who is who? Suppose they run?"

"Why, I reckon we'll git a good look at 'em," drawled Twistaway. "This-here sack I been totin' is cramful o' rags—black rags, too. I'm goin' to lay it down by the bank-wall an' soak her with coal oil. Then I got a old pistol here in a wire frame, with a string tied to the trigger. When we're ready to jump 'em, I'll jerk the string an' set off the torch. We'll see who 't is, a' right!"

He laid the reeking sack down ten feet to one side of the rear door and set up his tripod of heavy wire before it, thrusting the tripod-legs deep into the soft earth. Then he carried his trigger string out to where the others lay in the weeds of the vacant lot.

They hardly moved position for an hour. Twice, there were small alarms—hoof-beats somewhere. But each time as they waited tensely, the sounds died away. The sky was heavily overcast with the dusky semi-rain clouds of that region, totally obscuring moon and stars. It was hard for any of them to make out the vague bulk of the man who lay beside him."

"If they try to run for it," the Judge whispered suddenly in Twistaway's ear, "Where will they go? To Gato's? Toward the Triangle Bar? You know, once they've got away from here, whether or not we have seen them to know them, it will be difficult to hang a charge of bank-robbery or attempted robbery, even, on them. . . ."

"Why they'll hike right back across the River!" Twistaway assured him grimly. "Shore they will! If they're tryin' to clear their feet o' mud, won't they just *have* to make Southtown an' then come ridin' back tomorrow to show they just been celebratin'? I been considerin' that very point."

"I begin to see—" the Judge's low tone, even, could not conceal the depth and sincerity of the compliment intended "—why the Rangers worry criminals. . . ."

"Hey!" came a hoarse whisper from Jim Toomey the big freighter. "Hawsses—ain't it?"

They stiffened where they lay—perhaps forty yards from the bank's iron-sheathed rear door. It was the sound of horse's feet, muffled on the soft sandy earth of the side-street on the southward side of the bank. Slowly, the sound became louder until it ceased somewhere near the small dwelling house that was the bank's only neighbor.

Twistaway lay comfortably upon his stomach, Colt in extended right hand, the trigger-cord of his improvised flare in his left hand. All the ambushing men were hatless—a Stetson *might* loom up against a light background somehow.

THERE came a low murmuring of voices—and that, alone, would have told the waiting men that something was intended; that their speculations had not been wrong; their ambush useless. Then

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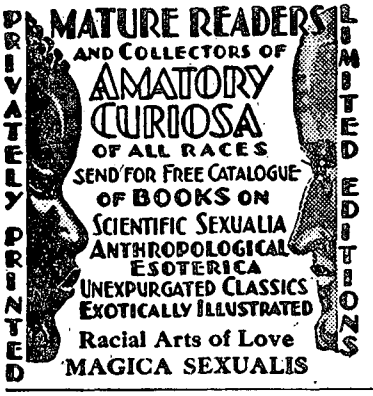

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—vaguest shadows against the slightly lighter surface of the bank's adobe wall—came figures. And with little or no hesitation, the sound of metal upon metal, not blows, but a sort of rasping. Crowbars seeking the seam between iron-covered roor and facing, Twistaway fancied.

He scowled. No more than three men were at that door. Where were the others? Then he heard again the murmuring of voices around the corner from which the first had come.

"Rest o' the gang stopped for somethin'," he told himself.

It would be foolish to light the flare before all of the robbers were within the radius of its glare. Ah! Here they came, now, two or three of them, judging by the size of the black mass they made. That would not be all of them, thought Twistaway; surely someone would be left to guard the horses. The horses—that gave him a thought. He put his lips to the Judge's ear:

"I'm goin' to sneak off toward the shack next-door an' when I git in a good spot—so's to block 'em from their hawsses—yuh pull the trigger-cord. I'll let yuh know when; listen an' I'll *cluck* twict—like as to hawsses, yuh know."

He went as soundlessly as a crawling Indian, which is as silently as a rattler on desert sand. He was halfway to the corner of the bank when suddenly a shot roared against the wall of the building and there leaped up a furious white flame that illuminated everything for yards around.

He did not rise, but merely rolled over and mentally cursed the Judge for nervousness or impatience or misunderstanding. Then he saw that he had wronged the little man. A figure stood, still gaping downward at his feet—one of the gang, a Mexican by the flashing glance Twistaway gave him—who had come around the far corner of the bank and stumbled over the trigger cord.

At the door of the bank Moonlight Jones and Monte Montgomery stood with sagging mouths that made near-ludicrous spots in their whitish faces, beside two cowboys, one of whom had a crowbar in his hands. Moonlight Jones and the deputy sheriff each held large canvas bags.

"It's a trap!" cried Monte Montgomery in a high, cracked voice. "Git to the hawsses, fellas!"

"Jones! Montgomery! Otwright! Gore!" cried the Judge from where he still lay hugging the ground. "Surrender!"

For answer the four men in the deep doorway opened fire in the direction of the voice. Came the rattling reports of answering shots from Toomey, the grizzled old cowman Tompkins, and the Judge. Twistaway fired into the press of them as they stood for a final instant before breaking in the direction of the horses. He saw one of the cowboys of the Triangle Bar come face forward with limp arms snapping out like a scarecrow's.

Then the Mexican who had set off the flare fled back around the corner without firing a shot. And straight toward Twistaway raced Monte Montgomery, Moonlight Jones and the remaining cowboy. The latter went down as if smitten by a titanic hand and the Colt from his relaxing fingers sailed through the air and landed almost in Twistaway's face, throwing a spray of fine sand into his eyes.

Twistaway came to his feet, clawing and swearing furiously. Eyes cleared, careless of the bullets of his friends which still quested through the light after the fugitives, he ran around the corner after Jones and Montgomery.

HORSES were adance there by the little adobe house. But one could see no more than their dim, shapeless bulk. Twistaway opened fire virtually at random, but trying to shoot a little above the level of a horse's back in the hope of getting some near-invisible rider. He emptied his Colt of its remaining four shells, then from behind him came the shots of his allies. And off raced some of the horses; it was impossible to tell how many.

With empty Colt held instinctively like a club, Twistaway leaped forward and cannoned into a horse. Now he could make out, against the little adobe's wall, two more animals. As he stepped toward them, his bootsole came down upon a large and yielding something. He nearly fell, then recovered and probed

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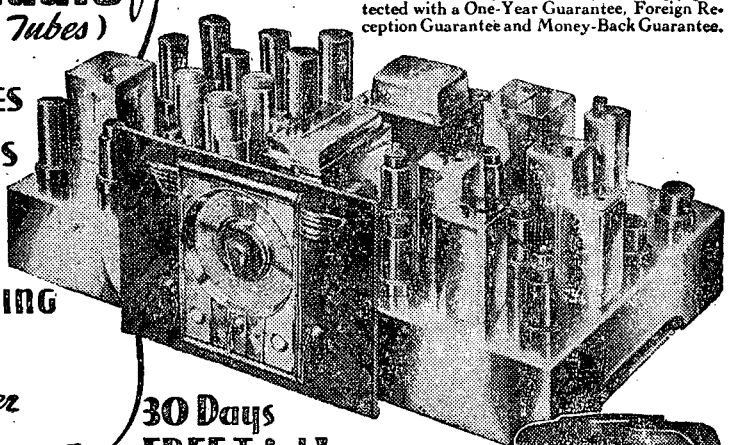

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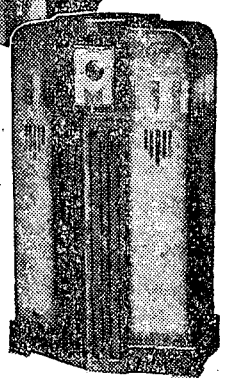

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cautiously with his toe. He was too old a hand not to know that what he touched was the moveless body of a man.

"Got somebody!" he snarled over shoulder, then fumbled for the more important things—the reins of these horses.

Somebody struck a match as Twistaway scooped in the drooping bridle reins.

"Gato Gonzales!" cried Jim Toomey in a voice to raise Vado's deafest. "Deader'n Judas Iscariot."

Twistaway ignored this. At least four men were racing away; perhaps more. He was trying to guess which way they would go. Montgomery and Jones knew, now, that they had been recognized in the daylight glare of the kerosene flames. Their race here was run. Where would they go—they and the brothers Gonzales? For beyond question, Twistaway believed, Rafael and Pablo Gonzales had ridden tonight with their uncle, Gato, and had escaped without a wound.

He whirled upon the others:

"The'll be folks here in a minute. Git yo'selves men to comb Gonzale's place. One o' yuh better go hell-for-breakfast out to the Triangle Bar. Likely, yuh'll find some inter-es-tin' things out the', even if these fellas ain't gone thataway. I'll see yuh some more—mebbe!"

"But—where are you going, Smith?" cried the Judge, as Twistaway swung up into the saddle of the horse his exploring fingers had found the best-lined.

"'Goin' to ride along the River a piece."

"You mean *over* the River!" the Judge charged indignantly. "And—"

"Aw, no, Judge!" Twistaway made grimly humorous denial. "Not if I don't git all mixed up. O' course—" this came back to them over his shoulder "—they do say a Ranger's mighty weak about g'ography. . . ."

Besides the wide, hard-bottomed ford at the ferrying-place between Vado and Southtown, there was a passable crossing some two miles to the east of the towns and so, generally, on the road to the Triangle Bar. There was also—and this was information gathered with a great deal of trouble that afternoon from divers small Mexican boys—a ford which *could* be crossed, if one had luck, to the westward.

Automatically, Twistaway studied his problem. For him, the chain of events in Vado had not moved satisfactorily. He was almost as far from accomplishing his errand as he had been before laying eyes upon Gato Gonzales, the Muchacho, Montgomery, Jones and the others. Vado was better off, of course, with certain undesirables removed by flight or sudden demise, but Twistaway was not enough of a reformer to find that the town's improvement compensated for failure of his own manhunt.

HE rode through the silent streets at a lope, looking for some trace of the fugitives' direction. A sleepy Mexican, standing in the doorway of a *jacal,* pointed to the east when Twistaway yelled at him a question. So it began to seem that either they intended making the Triangle Bar, or getting over the river by the ford east of Vado.

He touched the horse with impatient rowel and came around a corner into the middle of a little group of men who bent over something on the ground. A single horse was there, held by a man. Twistaway found himself covered twinklingly by several Colts.

"I'm a Ranger!" he snapped. "Huntin' four - five bank robbers! What's this?"

"Sher'ff Howells—deader'n a doornail!" a man snarled. "He met yo' robbers an' rode in front o' the bunch. Yelled at 'em an' asked—I was right yonder in my door—who they was an' what they was doin'. An' they all four started shootin' at him an' then just rode right over him an' whirled west at the corner."

Where he sat the robber's horse, Twistaway was north and west of the ferry-crossing. So, if the gang had turned west again—they could only be heading blindly for the doubtful ford that would bring them through the treacherous soft sands of the River bottom to the Mexican shore west of Southtown. He drew his reins taut and set in the spurs.

"Hey!" a man yelled at his retreating back. "I said they went *west.* Yuh're ridin' straight away from 'em!" Then,

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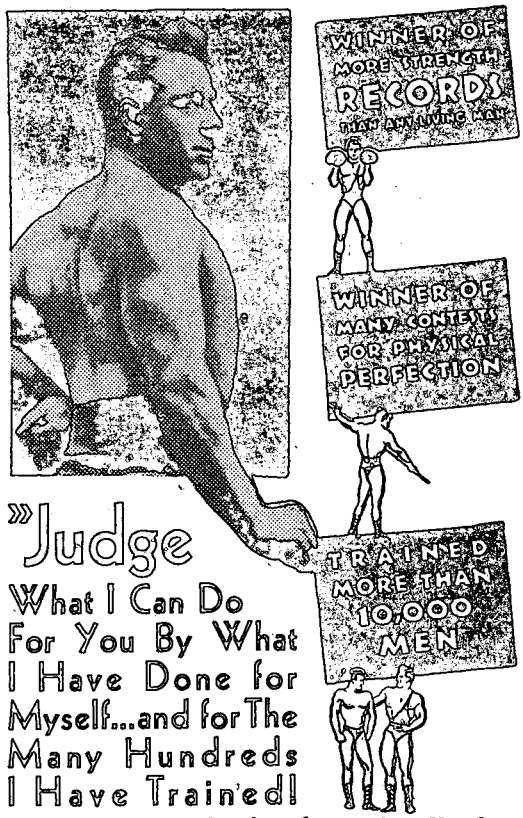

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faintly through the increasing space between: "First Ranger ever I see ridin' away from trouble!"

But, tight-lipped, sure now of what he would do, Twistaway came like a tornado down to the ford between the towns. The little ferry-scow he ignored, but pushed the panting horse through the shallow water and up the gentle incline on the Mexican side.

Southtown was at the height of its *fiesta* excitement. Lights blazed everywhere about the central portion of the town; the streets were thronged with both Mexicans and their neighbors from over the River.

Twistaway forced his mount through the fringes of the crowd, heedless of invitations to get down and enjoy himself. He turned off westward and when he came to emptied streets, set in the spurs again and the stocky cow horse went by noisome ways to the open country.

There was no trail; no moon to show a way. But moving as he did, on impulse, by instinct, Twistaway was somehow certain of his course.

Someone cried out drunkenly at him from beside the vague black mass of a mesquite clump. He reined in and a man asked thickly in Spanish who he was and why he rode like a madman straight away from the great *fiesta*.

"I ride with the word of Gato Gonzales!" Twistaway cried impatiently, once more obeying impulse. "I have lost my way in this thrice-damned darkness. A peso if you direct me aright."

"This is the road by which I sit," the man said. "I am the goatherder of the Señor Morales, whose *rancho* adjoins that of El Gato, lying beyond it. But none is there at the house of El Gato. The fellow who cares for the place is in the town, getting drunk. *I* slipped away but for a little while and now go back, but this Pedro Chacon is a shiftless devil and will sprawl in the streets for a week."

"The road is here, you say? It leads straight to the house?" Twistaway cried impatiently. "How far?"

"Oh, a little mile; no more. Where it dips into the dry gully, go on but a hundred feet, then turn to your right hand, to the house."

TWISTAWAY flipped him a coin and was racing ahead before the goatherder had ceased groping for it. An empty house—that was better than he had hoped for. But there were four desperate men to reckon with. They were murderers, all, now, with Sheriff Howell's killing. He cared little what happened to Jones and Montgomery, but the brothers Gonzales he wanted alive. To kill them in Mexico would not serve his purpose half so well as to have them hanged upon the scene of their crime in Perryton.

It was the difficulty of achieving this capture that worried him as he halted in a grove of cottonwoods and stared at the silent bulk of a small adobe house some fifty feet away. Evidently, he had beaten them here to Gonzales' *rancho*. So it was his to decide the terms of the coming battle. But he hardly knew what to plan.

"Four to one ain't so bad," he grumbled to himself, half-aloud. "Not when yuh got the drop on the outfit an' the' ain't lookin' for yuh. Chances are, I could wait inside an' down the whole dam' bunch 'fore they knew what hit 'em. But—they told the Mex' houseman at the Judge's, these Gonzaleses did, that they never would be caught. No dam' sheriff; no dam' Ranger; nobody'd ever git 'em. An' me, I shore do hanker to take 'em back to Perryton an' show them Mex' up thataway that they can't thumb their noses at the Rangers!"

He dismounted and led the near-fagged horse into the dooryard of the place, around it and into the scrub a good fifty yards back. Here he tied him and then went back to the house.

"Ought to be a ringtail' lulu o' a scheme to corral them gunies!" he thought. "The's bound to be—only I can't think o' it!"

He found the door on the latch; pulled the rawhide string and went inside. He hesitated about striking a match. Even allowing for a slow passage of the River, the four fugitives should be very near, now. But he wanted to know the layout of what might perhaps be his battleground. So he got close to the wall, well below the level of the small, high-set windows and rasped a match upon his trousers-leg, holding his Colt ready as the tiny flame sprang up.

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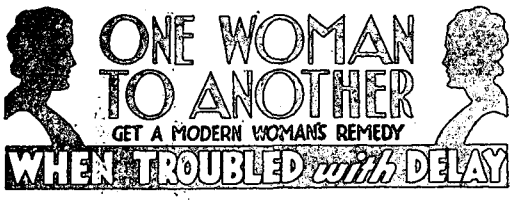

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The house was of two rooms; that in which he stood was the larger and seemed to serve as living-room and bedroom. There were rough bedsteads in two corners, covered with frowsy blankets. The second room had a home-made table and some rude three-legged stools in it. There were shelves and the caretaker's slim supply of shelled corn, black beans and other food.

"Dassent git under a bed—first place they'd look," he mused, returning to the largest room. "Could stand to one side o' the door an' try crackin' 'em over the head when they come in. But they might come all in a bunch. . . . Makes a noise, too"

He jerked his head sideways as the slow thudding of hoofs sounded in the darkness outside. Then he knew that he had really been wondering all the while if his guess—deduction, rather—had been correct. That he had been very much afraid, all the time, that they had not headed in this way. He ran over to the door and listened.

"—then he can git out an' hustle himself another one!" a voice snarled not ten feet away. "Had no business gittin' off the track an' boggin' his hawss. I tell yuh, Moonlight, I don't figure to hang around this neck o' the woods a bit longer 'n I can help. We do'no' what's happened to Gato. Mebbe they caught him. If they did, he'd squeal in a second to save his hide. Notice how he hung back with the hawsses tonight? After blowin' about wantin' to be shore this job was pulled right! He was goin' to boss it, he was!

"WE'LL hike east on this side o' the River until we git clean up to the end o' the Altos. Then we can cross over some dark night an' make the box canyon—nobody'll ever find that canyon in a million years—an' hole up there. 'Twon't be hard, then, to sneak down to the house an' dig up the money. Good thing ol' Gato never knew where we put it!"

"Listens good!" growled Monte Montgomery. "But if the Mex' on this side happens to think the's money in turnin' us over— Let's ransack the house an' see what there is to eat that we can pack. Then git goin'! Where's Rafael? Yuh ain't figurin' to take them!"

"Nah! They're Mex'. They're in their own country. Let 'em shuffle for themselves! Well, no use waitin' for 'em. That pony o' Rafael's was dam' nigh tuckered before they started ridin' double. Wisht they was here, though, at that. They could scurry around an' git some grub from the neighbors. Chances are the' ain't enough here."

"I'll go make a light," said Montgomery and there followed the creak of saddle leather and the thump of his boot-heels on the hard ground. "Better loosen the cinches, Moonlight. Let 'em git a breathin' spell."

He came clumping across the yard and opened the door like a man familiar with the premises. Twistaway shrank back against the wall—giving over thought of hunting a hiding place—and the door opened against him, almost. Montgomery would not have closed it, but Twistaway pushed it swiftly to as the deputy cleared its edge. The slam of it drowned the crunch of a long Colt barrel upon the black head of Monte Montgomery; drowned, also, the crash of his fall.

Twistaway was crouched over him almost before he had struck the hard earth and had his pistol-muzzle at Montgomery's throat. But the deputy was limp. Twistaway straightened then and moved toward the door—toward Moonlight Jones. Then he turned and from the shelf where he had seen it, took down a kerosene lamp. This he carried cautiously over to a bench beside the door. He laid a match beside it, then went back to the senseless figure and removed belt and Colt.

"What's the matter?" called Jones from outside.

Twistaway opened the door and slid out.

"No matches," he mumbled and moved across to the horses, listening strainedly for sound of the Mexican brothers' approach.

"Here's some," said Jones.

"*Thanks!*" Twistaway drawled, jamming his Colt-muzzle into Jones' mid-section. "Grab yo' ears, fella, or I'll put yuh where the dogs can't bite yuh! *Up with 'em!* Yuh dam' fool, yuh're teeterin' on the gate to hell an' in a minute she's goin' to slam shut on yuh!"

With his left hand he unbuckled

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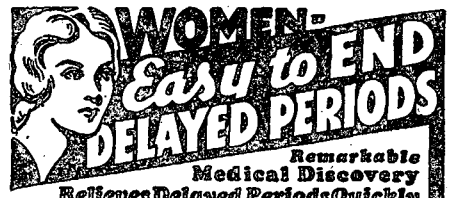

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Jones' cartridge belt, then, mindful of the Triangle Bar man's apparently weaponless state when first he had seen him, he slipped a hand inside his shirt and jerked out a second Colt from the shoulder-holster.

"Now, rattle yo' hocks inside. Monte's waitin' for yuh—but he do'no it!"

He governed Jones by left hand upon the rancher's shoulder, keeping the muzzle of his Colt pressed against Jones' back. So, like prisoners doing the lock-step, they moved inside the door and stopped.

"Pick up the matches off'n that bench an' strike one!" snapped Twistaway, kicking the door to behind them. "Now! Light that lamp!"

HIS steely fingers bit deeper into Jones' shoulder as the light flared up and both men blinked. If Jones had any thought of escape, of attack, that grip dissuaded him. Montgomery lay prone, seeming hardly to breathe.

"See if he's got any bracelets on him," grinned Twistaway. "He ought to have. Never hear o' a deputy startin' out to rob a bank without he had his star on an' some cuffs in his pockets. Ah! That's fine! That's shore fine! I thought he had a pair on. But, Jones, don't go projeckin' around his pockets thataway; yuh're a bank robber, yuh know, not a pickpocket. An' if yuh was to find a derringer, it'd likely just git yuh killed, quick. . . . So, just snap them cuffs on to our sleepin' beauty—behind his back, yuh idjut! Where the hell was yuh raised, anyhow! That's fine! Now, we'll take that rawhide lariat off'n the wall there. . . ."

Himself he bound Jones, who eyed him with set, expressionless face and blazing black eyes that were more murderously threatening than any mere words could have been. But he only grinned whimsically at the rancher—and with a bit of strong twine lashed his thumbs together.

When both prisoners lay on the floor of the second room, tied hand and foot, he sped to the door again and listened. But he waited an age-long half-hour for the horse with the brothers. They called out in Spanish and he answered them with many oaths to hurry inside.

"*Ah-h!*" snarled Rafael Gonzales, as the door slammed shut behind them and he faced Twistaway's Colt and Twistaway's grimly triumphant face. "*El Sarjento.* . . ."

"The Sergeant!" nodded Twistaway. "Over against the wall, both o' yuh—with yo' hands reachin' for the heaven the Perryton folks are goin' to raise yuh-all toward. Fine! First wiggle yuh make—well, first an' last'll be alla-same."

He tied them up with what was left of the lariat, left them in the middle of the floor and raced out. He moved thereafter like a ghost on high heels—a ghost that raced and stumbled and captured half-wild horses in the pole corral up the slope behind the house, brought them down to the dooryard and shifted saddles as if to win a wager.

Last, man by man he carried out and set in the saddles—having thoughtfully knotted all the reins together in case any should think of leaving him. But when he headed his little cavalcade into the mesquite thickets, avoiding the trail that led to the River, he was grinning. Panting a little, for all his hard condition, but grinning.

Dawn broke upon the silent, sullen riders in a wilderness of scrubs. Monte Montgomery, who had recovered consciousness to find himself bound, back in the house, was snarling like a captive wolf; Moonlight Jones rode with face set grimly ahead; the brothers Gonzales stared fixedly at their horses' ears—which bobbed grotesquely as the animals foxtrotted and looked, it may be, to the hopeless brothers, exactly like little figures jerking at the end of ropes. . . .

TWISTAWAY was haggard, but his blue eyes twinkled. Ahead lay the River—and he would like to see a young army try to keep him from crossing it with his prisoners! He had the murderers of old Judge Ambrose and the fact that the manner of his taking them was virtually sure to mean the end of his career in the Rangers was, after all, a matter of secondary importance. "*Get them!*" is the unwritten motto of the Rangers, nor is it weakened by any qualifying phrases.

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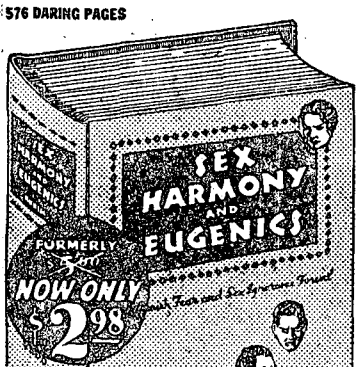

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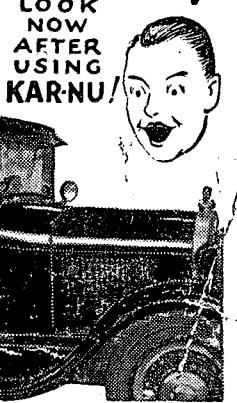

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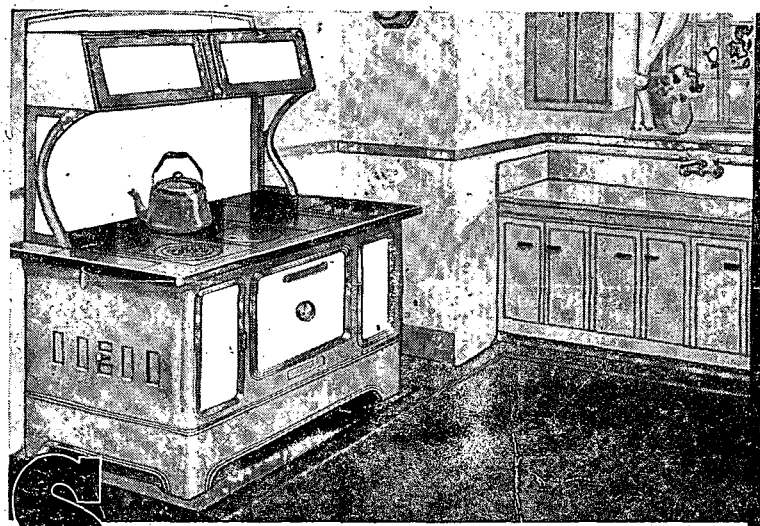

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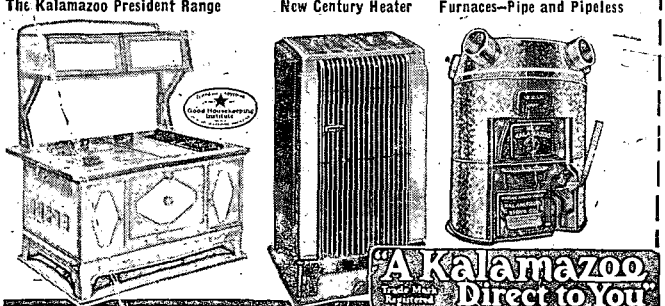

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